

Chapter 1

Fear. Unrelenting, overwhelming terror. This was all she knew, felt, and saw as she ran blindly through the dense, suffocating woods. Even the trees seemed to close in on her as she flew by at breakneck speed, reaching out to grab her in their clutches while she only just managed to elude them.

She sucked in air in irregular gasps, ignoring or possibly not even feeling at all the pain caused by the many gashes and bruises covering her aching body, covered by a long coat made unrecognizable with scorch marks. She didn't know how long she had been running. All she knew was that she had to get as far away from the horror behind her as she could force her legs to carry her. She *must*. Any fate she met here in these unfamiliar, nightmarish woods would be better than...

No, she *must* not think of it. She had to keep running. She had to. It was life or death. *Life or death*...the words she kept repeating in her mind. *Life or death*. Hours seemed to pass...or were it minutes? *Life or death*. The words seared themselves into her brain over and over and over again. Running...don't stop. *Life or death*. The last words she thought before she felt herself collapsing to the ground. *Life or death*. The last thing she thought before the thick darkness claimed her.

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Harry was glad to be back at Hogwarts after a terrifically boring summer, which seemed to drag on forever in his small room at the Durseleys. It wasn't much fun being at the beck and call of three truly horrible human beings.

And yet another part of him was feeling a bit apprehensive as he walked with his good friend and teacher Rubeus Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest a ways behind Hagrid's humble shack on the Hogwarts grounds. Hagrid had asked Harry if he would help him put out some food for some unseen creature living in the forest that Hagrid had taken upon himself to befriend and take care of. Harry

wasn't sure what the creature was, and he also wasn't sure he wanted to find out, yet he was always willing to help his friend Hagrid, no matter how crazy some of his notions were.

The forest seemed foreboding as they crunched through the floor of dead leaves, even in the daylight. And yet that wasn't why Harry was apprehensive. Walking alongside the towering man beside him who was absentmindedly humming a tune, Harry was lost in thought. It had never failed that every year something horrible or dangerous would find itself in Harry's path at Hogwarts. He never seemed to catch a break. With each year he got older, Harry learned more and more that something evil was brewing in the world of magic, and he also knew that, whether he liked it or not, he would play a crucial role in whatever resulted from it. Especially when it came to Voldemort.

Harry absentmindedly lifted his hand to rub his scar as he thought of the Dark Lord. Each day Voldemort was getting stronger. Harry knew it, but couldn't really understand why. Sometimes he would have horrible nightmares, some of which relived the night his parents were murdered. And always he would spring up from his bed drenched in a cold sweat, his scar throbbing. He just knew.

He also knew that Voldemort wanted him dead, and would do anything to see it through. His past encounters with the Dark wizard had told him that much, at least. One day, Harry knew he would have to face him once and for all...and defeat one of the most powerful wizards in the world.

He didn't want to think of it, but he knew he must. Dumbledore had warned him that the day would come when it would be just him against Voldemort, and no one else. It was the prophecy. That was why Harry had been training non-stop for the past year or so. Honing his skills with his wand, as well as that of the sword, taught to him in secret at Hogwarts by his godfather Sirius Black, which was the reason why Harry had arrived at Hogwarts early this year. He was given special permission from Dumbledore, and as a result of his hard training he had definitely improved in both subjects, and had become truly skilled in magic for his age.

But that uneasiness never left him, no matter how good he got or would get. Voldemort was out there, and he was coming for him.

Harry was thankful to have his thoughts interrupted by Hagrid, who had stopped unexpectedly, peering into the dusky light of the forest.

“ ‘arry, wait ‘ere. I think I ‘ear Rocky in that clearin’ over there. I ‘ope he isn’t eatin’ those mud bugs again. Filthy little buggers, they are...” Hagrid muttered as he made his way over to a clearing a little ways away beyond some trees.

Rocky, Harry realized, was the creature that was the cause of this outing. Harry was slightly relieved that Hagrid hadn’t asked Harry to come with him. He had had enough close calls with Hagrids “pets” in the past, and he didn’t feel like being attacked or eaten by anything today.

Harry sighed and ambled slowly forward, keeping the clearing in his line of sight. He couldn’t stand still, so he thought moving forward a little wouldn’t do any harm. Hands in pockets with his eyes fixed to the ground, Harry’s mind began to wander again.

He was wondering when his two best friends, Ron and Hermione, would get here. They had spent the summer together and had been dating ever since last year. They had told Harry that they would most likely arrive at Hogwarts with the rest of the students in a week or so. Harry smiled. He wasn’t surprised. Those two had been joined at the hip ever since—

He stopped abruptly as he caught sight of something red out of the corner of his eye...blood red.

He turned and took a few tentative steps towards what appeared to be a dark red sleeve of a coat outstretched from behind a large tree. Harry swallowed hard and slowly rounded the tree. Immediately he saw that that sleeve contained an arm, and that arm was attached to a body...a girl’s body.

Harry gasped and flew to her side without a second thought, landing hard on his knees. She was sprawled out in an awkward position, her form covered by a thick coat looking worse for the wear with its

numerous scorch marks and bloodstains. Harry had a feeling of dread creep over him that wasn't helped by the fact that this situation seemed all too familiar, as he had found the body of Barty Crouch in these very woods in this same manner last year.

The girl was covered in scrapes and bruises, and, thankfully, as far as Harry could tell, she was still alive, though barely. He swept a few strands of her long, dark brown hair out of her face and winced at the sight of a large gash on her forehead.

Something in common already, he thought grimly.

She looked like she was around his age and even with her face covered in dirt and bruises he could see that she was very pretty. He briefly wondered if she was a student, but quickly dismissed the thought as he would surely have noticed or met her before, seeing that she was most likely in his year. Besides, something about her and this situation seemed very different, almost foreign, than what Harry was used to.

The feeling of dread and foreboding grew bigger in the pit of his stomach. This was not good. He was only slightly aware of calling for Hagrid, as many thoughts and questions whirled through his head. So *much for a quiet year...*

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Harry had insisted on carrying the girl back to Hagrid's cabin, where they agreed they should take her until further instructions from Dumbledore (who Hagrid had immediately sent for) as to what they should do with her.

For some reason, Harry felt responsible for the girl and protective of her as he held her small, almost frail body in his strong arms. Maybe it was because he had been the one to discover her, or maybe it was something else...All he knew was that he needed to get her help, and soon.

Hagrid looked warily at the small figure Harry was now laying gently on his monstrous bed.

Harry turned and saw the look on his friend's face and immediately scowled.

"What?" Harry said, a little too accusingly.

Hagrid's expression changed quickly as he shifted his glance from the body of the young girl to the dark face of the young wizard. He shifted uncomfortably.

"S'nothin' 'arry, it's just...well, we don't know anythin' 'bout this girl or 'ow she got 'ere in the first place. S'all very suspicious ter me. We 'ave ter be careful, s'all."

Harry looked incredulous.

"What are you saying? This girl is half dead and you're worried about her being dangerous? She looks no older than I am! I mean, look at her Hagrid! Something or someone horrible did this to her. She's not the one who is a threat!" Harry yelled.

He was angry, that was for sure. He knew Hagrid was only trying to be cautious, and rightly so with all of the attacks and emergence of more and more Death Eaters recently, but something about this girl screamed innocence to Harry. For God's sake, she still had a lingering look of fear on her face, even in her unconscious state. *No one deserves this*, Harry thought with a glance at the girl's bloodied face.

Hagrid looked down in shame. "Yer righ' 'arry. I'm sorry. It jus' seems strange tha' we'd find 'er in the forest like tha'. She doesn' look like a student, and there's nothin' around these parts for miles. Jus' wonderin' where she came from, I guess."

Hagrid looked over at the girl, who looked even smaller in his enormous bed. "Poor thing..." he said sadly.

Harry sighed.

"No, I'm sorry Hagrid. I shouldn't have yelled like that. It's just this whole thing makes me so angry." Harry said while pacing back and forth in front of the bed, every so often stealing a glance at the girl.

“Who could have done something like this to her? And why? She seems so innocent...” He trailed off, once again staring at her face.

Hagrid shook his head, looking grim as he said, “Don’ know, ‘arry. But somethin’ tells me it ain’ good, whatever it is. Those scorch marks look like they came from a powerful blast o’ magic, if yer ask me.”

Harry frowned. She couldn’t be a Muggle. Not this far into the magic world. But then why wasn’t she a student? She could’ve been from one of the other schools, but it seemed strange that she was found so near to Hogwarts. All of the other schools were a great distance from here. Something very odd was going on here, that was for sure. He just wished he knew what it was.

Before he could ponder it some more, Hagrid’s door flew open to reveal the tall form of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore.

Chapter 2

Dumbledore walked in swiftly and closed the door, nodding briefly in greeting to both Harry and Hagrid, who returned the gesture.

"I came as soon as I got your message, Hagrid. Though I can't say there wasn't a bit of a delay, I'm afraid. It seems that Moaning Myrtle and Peeves got into a bit of a tiff that resulted in the flooding of the fourth floor bathroom." He sighed. "It never ends, does it?" He chuckled as he made his way further into the room.

Harry looked amused as he tried to imagine the argument between the two well-known ghosts of Hogwarts. The idea of it was pretty funny, he had to admit. Myrtle must have been furious to flood the whole floor. He grinned briefly, but it was soon wiped from his face as he was brought back to the situation at hand.

Dumbledore had stopped abruptly in the middle of the room as he caught sight of the battered girl on Hagrid's bed. Harry watched the Headmaster carefully. His face remained blank, but there was a tenseness to his body that wasn't there when he had walked in a few seconds ago.

Dumbledore reached the bed in two strides, and seemed to be examining the girl, his eyes lingering on the scorch marks of her coat. There was a brief pause, and a thick silence engulfed the room before Hagrid interrupted it hastily.

"We found 'er in the forest, Albus. Actually, it was young 'arry 'ere tha' found 'er. You see, we was out there lookin' ter feed Rocky, who--"

He was cut off sharply, though not unkindly, by Dumbledore, who whirled around to face Harry. "Was there anyone around when you found her, Harry?" he asked.

Harry straightened and answered with assurance, "No, sir. No one."

Dumbledore stepped closer to the young man. "Are you certain, Harry? No sign of anything?" he asked again, a curious look of focus coming to his face.

"Yes, sir. I'm sure." Harry said, wondering why Dumbledore seemed wary.

"E's righ', Albus." Hagrid interjected. "I checked the area, jus' in case. There was no sign of anythin' out o' the ordinary."

Dumbledore eased a little, though it seemed to Harry that the Headmaster was not completely mollified by this answer. He seemed to be struggling with something in his mind, and eventually he turned yet again to Harry, making sure to say his next words carefully.

"Harry, tell me something...and be honest," he paused briefly, staring intensely at the Boy Who Lived. "Your scar...did it hurt when you found the girl?"

Harry couldn't keep a look of surprise from springing to his face as he heard the Headmaster's question. Why would he ask him such a thing?

"N-no sir. It didn't hurt," he said, somewhat confused. "Why? You don't think she's...I mean she's not...one of them...is she?"

Harry was baffled. She couldn't be a Death Eater or a supporter of Voldemort. He knew she wasn't. He couldn't explain how he knew she wasn't a threat; he just felt it when he looked at her. Besides, her sleeve was torn, exposing the scratched flesh of her arm, and there was no sign of the Dark Mark. It didn't mean that she wasn't on His side, but Harry was certain she wasn't. But then why was Dumbledore still unsure?

Dumbledore looked slightly relieved at Harry's answer, though only slightly. He turned to face the young girl yet again, and said, "Good. That's good, Harry. And no, I don't think she is an enemy, but then again it doesn't hurt to be cautious. These are dangerous times..." Dumbledore smiled and said, "Of course I don't need to be telling you that now do I, Harry?"

Harry said nothing as he watched Dumbledore turn back to the girl, performing a healing spell of some sort that got rid of some of the minor cuts and bruises.

"I am afraid Madame Pomfrey will have to do the rest. She has been seriously injured," Dumbledore frowned, "In more ways than one, I imagine..."

Harry's eyes lifted from the girl's face to the Headmaster's. "What do you mean Professor?" he asked with concern evident in his voice.

Dumbledore turned to stare out of Hagrid's window, which faced the dark forest.

"Physical injuries are one thing, Harry...While emotional ones...well, they're something different all together, aren't they?" Dumbledore spoke softly, his back to Harry.

Harry gazed at the girl again, and then looked down at his feet. He knew all too well what the Headmaster was talking about. He had had to deal with many emotional blows throughout his short life thus far. He was reminded of his parents' murder at the hands of Voldemort when he was just a child every time he looked into a mirror and saw the lightning shaped scar on his forehead. The scar that made him one of the most famous wizards in the entire world. It was the scar belonging to the Boy Who Lived. The scar that was the reason he was a target. The reason why he would never live a normal life.

He had come to terms with it and had accepted it, but it didn't make it any easier. Harry looked up at the girl again and wondered what she had gone through to end up like this. He shivered as his eyes ran up and down her broken body. Suddenly his problems didn't seem all that bad.

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Harry stood hovering near the entrance of the Hospital wing of Hogwarts, where Madame Pomfrey had ordered him to stay until she had finished tending to the mystery girl. Harry had tried to protest, wanting to stay near the girl's side, but a hard look from Pomfrey had shut him up quick.

Dumbledore gave him a reassuring smile from the far side of the room as he), but Harry still felt watched Madame Pomfrey work her magic (no pun intended a little anxious.

After what seemed like an eternity, he watched from afar as Pomfrey finished and huddled together with Dumbledore in a hushed conversation. They blocked Harry's view of the girl, and he wondered if she was going to be ok.

What if she doesn't wake up? What if Madame Pomfrey is telling Dumbledore there's nothing she can do? She was so pale...she must have lost a lot of blood. What if--

"Stop it!" Harry whispered forcefully to himself out loud. *You don't even know this girl...why are you acting like a crazy person?*

The truth was, Harry didn't know why he was acting like this, and it kind of freaked him out.

Maybe I'm just craving interaction with someone who's NOT an adult or teacher. He thought.

It was true. Since Harry had arrived early to Hogwarts a week before to have his private lessons with Sirius and to practice with his wand, he had been bored stiff. Sure, he was always happy to spend time with Sirius and Lupin (who was teaching him advanced DADA), but he only practiced for a couple of hours every day. In his off time he was usually stuck wandering the halls or flying his broom on the Quidditch field. It was nice to have the time to himself to just think and relax, but it would also be nice to have someone to talk to, and since Ron and Hermione wouldn't arrive for a whole week Harry wouldn't mind getting to know and talk to this mystery girl.

If she ever wakes up that is... He thought as he stared at the ground.

He was jolted from his thoughts as he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see Dumbledore's calm face. Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen, and Harry realized she must have returned to her office.

Harry quickly glanced in the direction of the girl's bed to see her lying there, still unconscious. It was hard to tell from this distance what sort of condition she was in.

As if reading his thoughts, Dumbledore smiled at Harry and said, "It's alright Harry. She's going to be fine. She'll have a scar or two, and it will take her a few days to return to full health, but Madame Pomfrey is confident she'll recover nicely."

Harry felt immediate relief after hearing this. "That's good to hear, Professor. When do you suppose she'll wake up?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know, Harry. Only time will tell. I expect it won't take long. You know, it's a good thing you found her when you did...else she might not have woken up at all. You did well, Harry." The Headmaster said sincerely, gazing down at the young man before him.

Harry shifted uncomfortably, feeling slightly embarrassed by Dumbledore's comment. "It was nothing, really. Anyone else would have done the same..." he said awkwardly.

"Oh, of course, of course they would..." Dumbledore said with a wink and a twinkle in his eye. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to be returning to my office. Many things to do before school begins, you know," he said as he turned to leave.

Harry nodded and glanced once again in the direction of the girl. As he did so, a thought occurred to him, and he turned to Dumbledore who was halfway to the door. "Uh, Professor, wait." he said.

Dumbledore stopped and turned towards Harry, and said patiently, "Yes, Harry?"

Harry hesitated, then asked, "Erm, do you think...I mean, that is...uh, well..." he stopped, glancing over at the girl again.

Dumbledore looked amused, seeing that Harry was having a hard time getting whatever it was he wanted to say out. When he saw Harry look over at the young woman he guessed what it was Harry was trying to say and decided to help him out with it. "Perhaps it

would be a good idea for you to stay by the young lady's side for the time being. At least until she wakes up, that is. Wouldn't want her to wake up alone and frightened in a strange place, now would we?" He smiled gently, the gleam still in his eyes.

Harry grinned and was reminded of why he was so fond of the older man in front of him whom he had come to look up to as a mentor and friend. "Thanks, Professor," he said gratefully. He wanted to be there when she awoke, inwardly agreeing with the Headmaster's reasoning. He knew if it were him, he would want someone to be there to comfort him if he was to awake to a strange place.

Dumbledore, still smiling, nodded slightly to Harry and turned to go, only to stop again as he remembered something. "Harry, if I recall correctly, you have a lesson with Sirius today?" he inquired.

Harry started as he realized the Headmaster was right. How could he have forgotten that?

“Oh right, I forgot,” he said a little dejectedly. He didn’t mind having another sword fighting lesson (even if he was still sore from last time), but he also didn’t want to leave the girl by herself. He looked at the clock in the room to see he had about ten minutes until he was supposed to meet Sirius in the usual empty classroom they used for practice. He sighed.

“It’s alright, Harry. Go to your lesson. I’m sure she’ll be in the same spot when you return,” Dumbledore said reassuringly.

Harry nodded, realizing he was right. It was only two hours, and she didn't look like she'd be waking up anytime soon anyways.

He followed the Headmaster out the door and after bidding him a quick farewell, Harry hurried off in the opposite direction to meet the awaiting Sirius and begin what was sure to be another grueling lesson.

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Harry entered the abandoned classroom slightly out of breath. He had run most of the way in order to make it on time, since he had always made it a point to be punctual for his lessons, wanting to get the most out of them.

“You’re late Harry,” a voice cut through the open room.

Harry looked up to see his godfather, Sirius Black, staring back at him, sitting casually on the window ledge across the room, bathed in the sunlight streaming through it. It was an odd sort of contrast, the glittering, golden hue of the light upon the dark form of the man.

Harry quickly looked at the old and battered (though still working) grandfather clock on the back wall of the room to see that it read one minute past the hour. *He must be joking...* Harry thought as he turned with a ready-to-argue look upon his face, only to find Sirius grinning ear to ear good-naturedly and laughing silently.

Harry’s initial look of protest faded immediately. He smiled, realizing he’d just been had and gave a short chuckle, “Very funny.”

Sirius, still laughing, got up from his ledge at the window gracefully. “I certainly thought so,” he said, grinning.

Harry smirked in good humor and watched as Sirius began to carefully extract the long, powerful looking swords they used for practice from a leather case on the floor. Sunlight poured from the two large windows into the room, giving it an open, airy feel.

Harry took a few steps forward so that he could gaze out of the window nearest him while waiting for Sirius to finish setting up. His eyes swept over the broad, green lawn below, to the glittering lake beyond which looked far too inviting on this summer day. Then, almost against his will, his eyes found their way over to the Forbidden Forest. Dark and unmoving, the trees looked like sentinels guarding some unknown presence, and Harry shuddered as he was reminded of the morning’s events.

Hurriedly looking for a distraction, Harry turned to study Sirius as he performed an intricate protection spell on both of the swords (which

would prevent them from injuring either Harry or himself during the practice duels).

Sirius' appearance had changed immensely from when Harry had first seen him after his infamous escape from Azkaban. Then, he had been quite a frightening sight, so gaunt and pale that he looked almost skeletal. His clothes were torn, and his hair had been tangled and dirty. What had struck Harry the most, though, out of all, was the haunted emptiness in his eyes. Harry had been glad to see that look slowly dissipate over time. He never wanted to see that look in his godfather's eyes again. Never. He shuddered to think of it, even now.

Now, Sirius appeared to be healthy and happy for the most part, even though he still had not been pardoned and had been forced to go into hiding. However, that's not to say that he wasn't still at least a little intimidating to look at. Harry was fairly certain that, no matter what, Sirius would always seem a bit...shadowed.

Harry couldn't help but feel a little sorry for his godfather, however. It had to get lonely living by himself in seclusion from everything. The only people who even knew about his secret visits to Hogwarts were Harry, Dumbledore, and Remus. Everyone else in the wizarding world (besides the Order, that is) assumed he had gone into hiding at some unknown and extremely remote location. It was for the best, of course, but it didn't make things any easier. Harry could only hope that one day his godfather could be free to live his life like everyone else, as it should be.

"Daydreaming again, are we Harry?" Sirius inquired, breaking Harry's thoughts abruptly.

Harry glanced up, expecting to find a grin plastered on his godfather's face, but was surprised to see an entirely different look. That of intense concentration and...concern? Did Sirius see Harry's troubled look as he gazed out at the Forbidden Forest? Did he know what had happened? No, that was impossible. Only Hagrid, Madame Pomfrey, Dumbledore, and himself knew about the girl, and besides, it had just happened.

“No, just...you know, thinking,” he replied, a little unsurely. Should he tell him? He wasn’t sure how much of a secret it was supposed to be. That, and he didn’t want to worry his godfather for no reason.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Sirius asked nonchalantly, the look of intensity, however, never leaving his face.

Harry hesitated (a fact not gone unnoticed by Sirius) before saying, “No, it’s nothing,” he smiled reassuringly at Sirius, more than ready to get off the subject.

Sirius merely continued to stare at Harry. Five seconds went by...ten. Then, as if nothing had happened at all, Sirius’ manner changed completely as he grinned and threw Harry’s sword into the air where the young wizard deftly caught it.

“Very well then. Let’s begin.”

Chapter 3

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, Harry slowly made his way back to the hospital wing, limbs and body aching from the strenuous lesson from Sirius. It had been a good lesson, and Sirius had commended him for the progress he had made, but Harry was sure he wouldn't be able to walk properly for a week, at least. He grimaced even now as he climbed a set of stairs, knowing it would be even worse tomorrow.

But, he conceded, the pain was necessary, and if it meant being able to defend himself against Voldemort and any Death Eaters the dark lord sent his way, then Harry was happy to bear it. He needed to be ready for anything.

He needed to be unstoppable.

A little pain wasn't going to deter him from his goal. *Although it would be a hell of a lot easier without it*, he thought ruefully as he stepped into the hospital wing.

All thoughts of pain vanished in an instant, however, when he glanced again upon the fragile girl lying so pitifully on one of the white hospital beds.

He made his way over to her side slowly, as if afraid he would disturb her if he made any sudden movements. He stood over her bed, taking in her appearance. She seemed to be in the same state as when he left her, pale and unconscious. Her dark, mahogany-colored hair spilled over the pillow, contrasting sharply with the starched whiteness of it.

Most of the small cuts had by now disappeared, thanks to Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey. Even the large gash on her forehead had been diminished, though not entirely healed. A small bandage covered it now, the only thing marring her pretty face.

Harry quietly pulled up a chair next to the bed and sat down. As he stared at the girl, a billion questions came flooding back into his mind, dying to be answered. He still had no inkling as to who this girl was,

and it was driving him mad. He hoped she'd wake up soon. He didn't know how much longer he could take this mystery.

So, with a sigh, the famous Harry Potter settled in as comfortably into his chair as it would allow and gathered his patience together to wait for the moment when the girl would awake, and he could finally set his mind at ease about the whole thing.

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It was a most curious sensation, but one she was quite used to. The familiar fog encased her mind as she struggled to break free from it, feeling sluggish. One by one her senses slowly returned, but as always it was the pain she registered before anything else. Her body ached everywhere, but she was still not fully out of the fog yet. There was also a strange-yet-familiar, even sound that seemed to come and go in and out of her consciousness, but she had trouble placing it.

Slowly, she came to, forcing herself to open her eyes so she'd be out of the foggiest of her mind for good. After what seemed like an eternity and with great effort, her eyes slowly opened, long, dark lashes fluttering as her surroundings came into focus after a blurry few seconds.

Immediately she noted that she was no longer in the frightening woods, but rather, in a large, open room filled with empty beds of the same sort she was currently lying on now. Her confusion quickly turned to panic as she realized that none of it looked the least bit familiar. It seemed to be a hospital of some sort, but where? How did she get here? Did *they* know she was here? Had they found her, after all?

Before she could ponder this more, she suddenly became acutely aware of a presence next to her. Fearing the worst, she shot her eyes towards the form and was surprised to see a young man reclining in a chair next to her bed, and he seemed to be...sleeping.

His tall figure was draped over the small chair, long limbs thrown out at odd angles, looking like he had tried to get comfortable and failed.

His head was tilted back over the top of the chair as he breathed deeply in and out in a somewhat soothing cadence.

So *that* was the odd sound she had been trying to place... She thought she had imagined it.

Gingerly, she tried her hardest to sit up, mindful of her weakened state and the pain that shot through her with even the smallest of movements. She also didn't want to awaken the sleeping stranger, uncertain if he was friend or foe, so she did so as quietly and carefully as possible. After a few grueling moments she had succeeded in her task and turned to get a better look at the mystery guy.

He looked to be about her age, maybe a little older. It was hard to tell since she couldn't see his face properly at the angle it was at. From what she could see, he had dark, raven-colored hair, and wore glasses. She knew he had to be pretty tall, his lean form stretched the way it was. With a touch of apprehensiveness, she noticed that he was powerfully built, as well.

Her fear of him faded into something else entirely, however, as she studied this aspect of him more thoroughly. He wore casual black slacks and a navy long-sleeved shirt, and she gazed at his broad shoulders, flat stomach, and defined arms noticeable even through the material of the shirt.

As her eyes traveled over his body, she caught herself wondering what he looked like without it on.

At this, she gasped, shocked that such a thought had entered her mind, especially at a time like this. For all she knew, he could be dangerous. A threat. She suddenly decided it was time to get out of there, but as she moved to get out of the bed, she noted with rising alarm that he had begun to wake up.

As the sudden sound of the girl's gasp flooded his consciousness, Harry slowly woke from his slumber. Dazedly, he opened his eyes and found himself staring at the ceiling. Confused, he sat up, only to immediately regret doing so when his neck throbbed in protest at the awkward position it had been in. *I must have fallen asleep...* he thought, reaching up to rub at his aching neck.

Only then did he steal a glance at the bed to discover to his shock and surprise that, not only had the girl awoken, but she was also staring straight at him, though a bit uncertainly. Harry froze, his hand on his neck.

“Hi,” he said after a moment, rather stupidly but too stunned to say anything else. He could hardly believe that she was actually awake and that he was talking to her.

She had been frozen in fear when he had begun to wake up, but now that he was quite alert and staring her full in the face, she had to try her hardest to hold back a laugh. His dark hair was in a tousled state of disarray (whether from his nap or naturally, she didn’t know), and his glasses had been knocked askew on his face when he sat up, so that now they were crooked. Not to mention the shocked and slightly confused look on his handsome face. He looked adorable, she realized quite unexpectedly.

“Um, hi,” she replied shyly, not yet certain if she was indeed in danger or not.

Harry quickly righted his glasses and tried his hardest to smooth down his hair, which, as usual, was having none of it. With that done, he finally got his first good look at the strange girl before him.

His earlier observation of her, he realized, was quite incorrect. She wasn’t pretty...she was beautiful, though he couldn’t quite pinpoint what had changed between then and now, besides the fact that she was awake. But as he continued to study her, he realized what made all the difference immediately.

It was her eyes. Never had Harry seen such beautiful eyes.

They were large and a pearly gray in color, crystal-clear. Her facial features alone were quite plain, but with those eyes...Harry was sure he could see her very soul through those eyes. *A very sad soul...* he observed with a frown.

A silence ensued as they stared at one another, and she began to get quite uncomfortable under the young man’s intent gaze. It didn’t help

that she had trouble looking away from his beautiful, jewel-green eyes. *Like two emeralds...*

She mentally shook herself and forced her eyes to turn away. Harry, too, came out of his trance, but only when he realized that the girl had asked him a question.

"I'm sorry, what?" he asked, noting her inquiring glance and looking slightly embarrassed that he hadn't been listening. *Come off it, Potter.*

The girl attempted a smile. "I was just, uh, wondering where I am...exactly."

"Oh...OH! Right, of course. You wouldn't know, would you? I mean, how would you, right? You've been unconscious the whole time, and you're obviously not a student, so I suppose there'd really be no reason at all that you *would* know, is there? I mean, unless of course you had been here before, but then I guess you wouldn't be asking that question, would you? Unless you had bumped your head or something, and couldn't remember, but I—" Harry halted in mid-speech when the girl began to laugh quietly. It was a beautiful, infectious sound that made Harry smile, too.

He grinned, cheeks tinged with red in his embarrassment. "Gosh, I'm rambling a bit, aren't I?"

The girl laughed again, and then smiled. "A bit..."

As she stared into his kind, smiling face, she felt herself blushing, as well. *What is wrong with me? I don't blush...*

Harry pulled himself together. "I'm sorry. I probably just confused you even more," he grinned. "Well, I guess I might as well start from the beginning. You see, I was out in the forest with Hagrid—"

"Hagrid?" she interrupted, confused.

"Yeah, he's my friend and a teacher here, as well," he explained.

"Teacher? So this is a...a school?" she asked. *Could it be possible?* Had she truly made it that far?

Harry nodded with a proud air. "Hogwarts, to be specific," he smiled.

Hogwarts. She was really here. The school she had only read about in books and the occasional newspaper. She could hardly believe it.

Harry continued, unaware that his words had shocked her. "I found you, in the forest, I mean. You were in pretty bad shape, so I brought you to Hagrid's cabin so Professor Dumbledore could have a look at you—"

"Dumbledore? *The* Dumbledore?" she asked, incredulous. She had gathered quite a bit of respect for the head of Hogwarts through her numerous readings of him. She could tell he was a great man...despite what *they* said in their whispered conversations outside of her locked door at night. She shuddered, pushing the unpleasant thought from her mind.

"Uh...yeah," he said, slightly confused. He pushed on, however, when she nodded her head and gestured for him to continue. "Uh, anyway, he took care of some of your minor injuries and we brought you here. The hospital wing, that is. Then Madame Pomfrey, the school nurse, tended to you, and here you are."

As if on cue, Madame Pomfrey herself appeared in the doorway, an irate look upon her face when she noted that the girl was awake.

"Mister Potter!" she yelled, scaring the wits out of him as he turned and abruptly stood at her hurried approach. She reached the bed in record time and turned towards the young wizard, a disapproving look on her face as she scolded him.

"I allowed myself to be convinced to let you stay by the girl's side until she awoke, but that was in the hopes that you would have the soundness of mind to come fetch me when she did!"

Harry opened, and then closed his mouth, afraid he would dig himself into an even deeper hole and simply shrugged instead. He looked at the girl with a sheepish smile as he was pushed to the side by Pomfrey, who began examining the girl and fretting over her like she was one of her own, as she did with all the students.

The girl smiled in response automatically, but it faded as a thought struck her quite suddenly. *Potter?* Where had she heard that name before?

Harry watched as Pomfrey gave the girl a few healing potions to drink, which he knew, from personal experience, tasted quite awful. The girl grimaced as she drank them down until Pomfrey was satisfied.

“Now I want you to stay put, dear, until I return with the Headmaster. He’ll be wanting to speak with you,” Pomfrey informed the girl gently and turned to leave, though not before giving Harry a stern look. Harry responded by throwing Pomfrey his most innocent and charming smile, which she chose to ignore with a huff as she left the room.

Harry turned to the girl, a big, stupid grin on his face. “She loves me.”

“I’m sure,” she laughed, and Harry smiled again at the light, airy sound. It was good to see her smile and laugh. For some reason (even though Harry didn’t know her at all), he had a sneaking suspicion that she rarely did either of them so freely. With this thought brought the realization that he didn’t even know her name yet.

“I’m Harry, by the way,” he said as he held out his hand for the girl to shake.

She stared at his outstretched hand, and then back up at him, not really sure what to do. She was slightly confused. No one had ever shown her such kindness or respect before, and it made her more than a little uncomfortable. She wasn’t sure she deserved it. All her life she had been told that she didn’t, and yet here was this incredibly handsome, kind, funny, young man who actually seemed to care. She wasn’t used to this, to say the least.

Harry grew a little concerned when the girl simply stared down at his hand, her brows furrowed as if in confusion. Had he said something to upset her? She looked troubled. Afraid that he had done something wrong, Harry started to lower his hand and was just about to apologize when the girl lifted her own to meet his in a gentle grasp.

"It's nice to meet you Harry. I'm Anabelle," she shook his hand and smiled, blushing slightly. She seemed to be doing that a lot around him.

"Anabelle," he whispered, letting it roll off his tongue. They stared at each other for a moment before realizing quite suddenly that they were still holding hands. Anabelle broke the hold she had on him, slightly embarrassed as she brushed a strand of her hair behind an ear, though not sure why.

Harry found the movement and her embarrassment to be almost unbearably cute. *She looks good in pink*, he thought to himself, grinning.

Eye contact broken, she had time to gather her thoughts, where something was nagging at her from deep inside. What was it? She glanced up into his face again, and suddenly it hit her.

"Wait, did you say your name was Harry?" she asked, wondering if this was the person she thought he was.

The grin was immediately wiped from his face, and Anabelle could almost see the wall that went up around him automatically at this question.

Uh oh. Here it comes, he thought as he bit back a sigh. "Yeah..." he said reluctantly.

"And...your last name is...Potter?" she asked hesitantly.

Harry scratched his head as he cast his eyes downward. "Yup," he finally replied.

He was more than a little embarrassed. No matter what happened, he was certain that he would never get used to the fact that everyone knew who he was. But if he was expecting some sort of dramatic reaction or outburst from Anabelle upon his confirmation, he was surprised. She didn't squeal in excitement, or scream, or gush about how great it was to meet him, like most of the people who met him did. As a matter of fact, her reaction to this news was so unlike anyone else's that it shocked him.

Anabelle merely frowned upon learning this information and cast her eyes downward, trying to hide her surprise. Her mind worked furiously to sort it out. *Harry Potter*. So this was he? Saying she was stunned would be an understatement. *This* was the enemy her parents had spoken of with malice and hatred? The great threat to the Dark Lord himself? Something about the way her parents had spoken of him and spit his name out as if it were poison made her imagine a very old and powerful wizard.

No wonder she hadn't connected him to the name she knew so well.

There were nights she would lay in bed, locked in her small room, and imagine that this Harry Potter was a savior, an angel who would one day rescue her from her horrible prison. If he was *their* enemy, then he was her friend, she figured. But as she looked at the Harry Potter before her, she still had trouble believing it. He was so, well...*young*. In her dreams she had never pictured someone so young and handsome. It almost seemed ridiculous that her parents would hate and fear this gentle, green-eyed creature. She looked at him and felt safe. Was it possible?

"Is...is your father named Harry, as well?" she asked quietly, thinking that maybe this was the son of the powerful wizard *they* all sought to kill.

Harry's jaw dropped slightly in surprise at the unexpected question.

Perhaps he hadn't heard her correctly. Was this a joke, or something? No, he realized as he looked at her face. This was no joke. She really had no idea.

She doesn't know? How can that be? How can she know my name without knowing the story behind it? It was impossible, he realized. There was no way she could know who he was without knowing that his parents were dead. It was pretty much why he was famous in the first place. Something strange was going on here...

The shock he felt at her question still had hold of him, and he found it difficult to speak. He tried to work his throat to respond, not really sure what he was going to say.

“I...” he began falteringly, only to be interrupted sharply by the sound of the door opening, followed by hurried footsteps.

Chapter 4

Dumbledore came striding into the hospital room, Madame Pomfrey at his heels.

Anabelle immediately sat up as straight as she could and hoped she looked at least semi-presentable as she tucked her hair behind her ears. She was more nervous than she had ever been in her life. What if he told her to get out? She didn't have anywhere to go... *Best make a good impression*, she thought.

Harry stood next to Anabelle's bed, still slightly shell-shocked from her question. He was glad that Dumbledore was there. Maybe now he could sort this mystery out and find out who this girl really was.

Dumbledore reached the girl's bed and looked down at her with a gentle smile. "Well, young lady, you're looking much improved. You gave us all quite a scare, you know. How are you feeling, now?" he asked with evident concern.

"I...I'm feeling much better now, thank you sir," she said timidly, relieved that he hadn't told her to get out yet and uncertain how to react to his caring gaze.

As if sensing the girl's fear and apprehension, Dumbledore gave her a warm and reassuring smile. "It's alright, dear. You are safe and welcome within these walls. No doubt Harry has told you where you are and the circumstances under which we found you?" he inquired.

Anabelle nodded and glanced quickly at Harry with a small smile. "Yes sir, he told me."

"Very well then. I believe introductions are in order. I am Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts," he bowed slightly and looked expectantly at the girl before him.

"It's truly an honor to meet you, sir," she flushed. "I've heard--er...read so much about you," she said. Dumbledore smiled, and she went on. "I'm Anabelle."

Dumbledore nodded. "And your last name, my dear?" he asked.

"Oh! It's Carrows. Anabelle Carrows," she said without thinking. She realized her mistake, however, when Madame Pomfrey gasped and the room fell deathly silent.

Harry looked around, first at the shocked face of Madame Pomfrey, then at the very still form of the Headmaster (who was very obviously trying to hide his surprise), and finally at the crestfallen Anabelle, who looked as if she wanted to crawl under the covers and disappear. What was going on?

Dumbledore was the first to break the heavy silence. "Your father, then, is Alecto Carrows?" he asked quietly.

Anabelle was too scared to speak, so she nodded slowly, afraid to meet the Headmaster's eyes. *This is it. They're going to tell me to get out. Oh gods, what if they throw me in prison, or something? I never should have opened my big mouth,* she lamented inwardly.

Dumbledore's face was expressionless as he studied the girl intently. "I see," he said finally.

Anabelle realized she had to say something, anything, to make them understand. She looked pleadingly up at the Headmaster, her words flowing out of her so fast it was almost difficult to make sense of it. "Please, sir, I know this looks horrible, but I don't mean anyone any harm. I-I'm not like them, I swear it. They're terrible people. That's why I ran away. I *had* to, you see? They were going to kill me, I know it! I didn't even intend to end up here, I was running for so long...I-I understand if you want to get rid of me, but please know that I'm not one of them. Please—" She broke off in a sob, unable to say more.

Dumbledore immediately moved closer and laid a gentle hand on Anabelle's shoulder. He spoke in a soothing voice, trying to comfort the distraught girl before him. "Calm yourself, my dear girl. Shhh, now, it's all right. No one is going to get rid of you, I assure you. As a matter of fact, I think you may be stuck with us for some time," he smiled.

Anabelle looked into the Headmaster's kind eyes and knew he was telling the truth, which calmed her down a bit. She sniffed a few times, the occasional tear streamed down her face. Madame Pomfrey patted Anabelle's hand and shook her head, looking pityingly upon the girl.

"Oh, you poor dear. There's no need to cry now. It's not your fault your parents were—er...are, followers of...well, you-know-who," she whispered the last part (as many witches and wizards who were afraid to speak his name did).

Harry looked up in shock, finally realizing why the Headmaster and Pomfrey had reacted so dramatically to the girl's identity.

"Your parents are Death Eaters?" he blurted out towards Anabelle incredulously. He didn't mean it as an accusation (after all, there were students in Hogwarts who had Death Eaters for parents); it just wasn't what he was expecting.

He immediately regretted it, however, when she hung her head down in shame. He felt a pang in his heart as he saw the tears roll silently down her face, and he realized that he would have given anything at that moment to see her smile and laugh like she had been only moments before. *Great job, Potter.*

Pomfrey frowned disapprovingly at Harry, and Dumbledore turned serious eyes in his direction. "Yes, Harry. Alecto and Andromeda Carrows have long been in the service of Lord Voldemort (at this, Pomfrey winced). They went missing, however, shortly after Voldemort's fall the night you received that scar, as many of his followers did."

Harry averted his eyes as pain filled him, as it always did, when he was reminded of that fateful night. The night his parents were killed.

Anabelle looked up at Harry, noticing for the first time the strangely shaped scar upon his forehead, half-hidden by his mop of unruly hair. *He must have gotten it as a baby*, she realized, remembering that her parents had gone into hiding around the time she was born. She knew it had to be significant if Dumbledore mentioned it, but she wasn't sure why. She made a mental note to ask Harry about it later.

"Many assumed they were dead," Dumbledore continued, "but it seemed more logical that they had gone into hiding to avoid being taken to Azkaban. A search was conducted, but no trace of them was ever found. I have known all this for a very long time now, you see," he paused. "However, I was quite unaware that they had a child," he fixed his gaze on Anabelle, curiosity gleaming in his eyes.

Madame Pomfrey shook her head again in disbelief. "To think, a poor baby in the hands of those monsters! Why, it's unbelievable!" Dumbledore shot a glance at Pomfrey that clearly told her to hush up. She did, of course, but couldn't help tutting every now and then, shaking her head as if trying to convince herself that it wasn't true.

"Ms. Carrows, perhaps it would be best if you explained to us the circumstances under which you came to be here," Dumbledore spoke gently to Anabelle. "I assure you, what you say will not condemn you to anything. You have nothing to fear here. However, it would be most helpful..." he trailed off, gazing meaningfully at her.

Anabelle sniffed. "It's Anabelle," she whispered, barely audibly.

The Headmaster frowned and leaned closer. "I'm sorry?"

She looked up into his eyes. "Anabelle. My name's Anabelle," she stated clearly.

The Headmaster nodded in understanding and smiled kindly at her. "Of course. Anabelle. Forgive me."

She nodded and tried to smile, but somehow she couldn't. She knew she had to tell them everything, and it wouldn't be easy. The last thing she wanted to do was relive all of the painful memories she had suffered throughout her life, especially when she had finally succeeded in escaping the hell she'd left behind. She felt another breakdown coming. *I can't do it...I can't.*

However, just when she was about to fall apart all over again, she felt someone take her hand.

She looked up to see Harry looking down at her; his green eyes boring into her own as if they were saying, '*you can do it.*' His hand

grasped hers in a gentle, yet secure embrace that made her feel like she was safe. Like nothing could ever harm her again. He nodded almost imperceptibly and squeezed her hand, letting her know he was there for her.

It gave her the strength she needed for what she was about to say.

She looked deep into his eyes and gave a small smile of thanks. She cast her eyes downward, took a deep breath, and began her story.

“My mother had me shortly after she and my father had gone into hiding. I’m not sure if they even wanted a child...my father certainly didn’t. When I was very young he wouldn’t even look at me most of the time, and when he did, it was either with disgust or...hatred. My mother...well, she took care of me...but it was never with love. Even as a child I could see that. In those early years, I remember her being better than my father, but she always handled me with a sort of...neutrality. She looked at me, but never really saw me.

“I learned early on not to cry, or fuss, or whine in front of them. They either paid no attention or...punished me. We went from place to place, usually small villages or abandoned cabins. Sometimes I think the only reason they kept me around was so they could use me to their advantage. They knew that they wouldn’t be recognized as easily if I was around, since no one knew about me. Their pursuers weren’t looking for a couple with a child.

“As I grew older, things got worse. I wanted to know why we were hiding and from whom, but they refused to tell me anything, and my father would always get angry with me for asking too many questions. I think they must have sensed that I wasn’t like them, and the older I got, the more hostile they were towards me.

“They would lock me in my room every night, and I was almost never allowed to go outside or talk to other people. Sometimes they would leave for hours at a time, though I never knew where they went, and they never told me...at least at first they didn’t tell me. I never tried to escape because I knew what they would do to me if I were found.

“I started noticing that I could make things happen whenever I was very sad or angry. It wasn’t a total surprise, though, since I knew they

were wizards, but needless to say, I was fascinated by it. I tried controlling it, but since it only happened when I was feeling a strong emotion, it was useless.

“However, one night when I was about twelve or so, I managed to open my door. I didn’t mean to, but I was crying and feeling bitter and angry about my life. I couldn’t understand why they hated me so much.” At this, Anabelle broke off as her emotions swelled, and she choked down a sob. She was desperately trying not to break down.

Harry gave her hand another squeeze, trying to give her the strength he knew she needed to continue. Everyone was silent and listening intently as she went on.

“I knew they had been gone for some time, so I thought it was safe to go into the main room. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do, or even if I was going to do anything at all, but I stopped when I noticed something on the kitchen table.

“It was a wizarding newspaper. My mother had taught me how to read when I was very young; since it was the only thing I seemed to be interested in. She gave me a few books, which I treasured and read over and over again because they provided me with an escape from my world. I think she just wanted me to be occupied with something so I wouldn’t bother them, but it was fine by me.

“Anyway, I sat down when I spotted their names on the front page. It was an article that gave the names of the followers, or...Death Eaters, of Lord Voldemort that were still missing. They were on the list, and beside their names were the reasons why they were wanted. It said they had killed several witches and wizards, as well as a few muggles.

“I was horrified. I had always known that whatever they were wanted for, it was bad...but I never imagined this. I read the entire thing over and over again. I didn’t want to believe it, but there it was staring me in the face.

“I don’t know how long I sat there. All I remember is my parents returning and seeing that I had gotten out of my room. My father was furious. He made to hit me, and I covered my head, waiting for it to come, but it never did. I looked up and saw that he was staring at the

newspaper open before me. He looked at the article, then at me, and...smiled, only it wasn't a nice smile, it was...evil," she whispered and shuddered, hugging herself as she remembered the terrible look on his face.

"After that, everything changed. He could see how horrified I was by what they had done, so he...tortured me with it. He forced me to listen as he went over each death in terrifying detail. I begged him to stop, but he ignored me and shook me when I cried and pleaded with him as he went on. Then he asked me if I wanted to know where they went when they disappeared. I shook my head, but he didn't care. He was...enjoying it. He liked watching me squirm. It was I-like a game for him."

She took a steadying breath, and Harry's hand tightened his hold on her own as his other formed a fist. He was having a hard time fighting his anger down enough to listen to her story. It was like the evil in them had sought out the good in her in order to destroy it. He almost couldn't fathom such cruelty. How could anyone want to hurt her?

He looked at Dumbledore to see if he was feeling the same way, but if he was, he was doing a good job at hiding it. His face was emotionless as he patiently waited for Anabelle to continue, but his eyes betrayed what he was really feeling. They were filled with sadness. Pomfrey looked horrified, shaking her head in dismay at the girl's words.

"He told me that they went out to do service for the Dark Lord, who he praised to me, making him seem like he was a God, or something. H-he told me that they went out to kill anyone who was in Voldemort's way. They had killed three muggles that night, a mother, father, and child, simply because it was...fun. He told me how they had screamed and begged for mercy." She paused, and a tear streamed down her face.

"Everything changed from that night on. They tortured me with information, telling me horrible things they did and would do. I tried not to listen, but it was no use. It was so much worse than being punched or kicked. It would give me nightmares. I couldn't escape

from it. I would wake up in the middle of the night, sweating, with the sound of those muggles' screams in my head. It was so horrible...

"I would hear my parents talking sometimes at night outside my door when they thought I was asleep. They mentioned your name a few times," she nodded at Harry. "They talked about how Voldemort would defeat you and conquer the wizarding world. They spoke with such hatred and malice that it scared me. I didn't know who you were or why they hated you. That's why I was so surprised when you told me your name. I wasn't expecting someone my age to be the great enemy of Voldemort," she told him.

Harry listened attentively and realized why she had reacted so strangely when she discovered his identity. She didn't know anything about him, really, just that he was Voldemort's enemy. It all made sense now.

"Your name gave me hope. I knew that if someone was opposing them, fighting them, then it couldn't be all bad. There was a chance they could be stopped, and it gave me strength. Even though I had never met you, it gave me strength. It was all I had to hold on to," she said quietly.

Harry's emotions swelled as he looked at her downcast face. He had given her hope? He didn't know what to say. He felt a stirring of something deep inside him, but couldn't identify it. Was it concern? Sadness? Sympathy? Or was it something else...?

"When I was fifteen," she continued, "we moved again to a small wizarding village in the mountains. The house was small and secluded, out of the way from everything. My parents never spoke to the villagers and forbade me to, as well. They were gone throughout most of the daytime, so I had a lot of time to myself, which I was grateful for, but it got really lonely. I thought, if only there was a way I could somehow get out, not even to run away (I knew that even if I did manage to escape them I wouldn't have anywhere to go), but just to see the village and explore, then it would be better.

"I figured I could go during the day and come back long before they returned. I just...I felt so trapped. I had to try, or I knew I would go mad. One day, I finally worked up the courage to try and get my door

to open, like I had before. For hours I did everything I could think of, even going as far as trying to unscrew the hinges physically, but nothing worked. They had made sure I wouldn't get out again. I was about to give up when I noticed something.

"My room had a window, but it had been boarded up long ago, making it seem impenetrable, which is why I never tried it before. But the boards were so old; I knew there *must* be a way to get to the window. If I could get past the boards, I knew I could easily climb out since my parents hadn't bothered to cast a spell on it (probably for the same reason I had disregarded it as a means of escape before).

"As I got close and inspected the boards, I noticed that the wood around the nails on all but one corner had been eaten away. It was only noticeable up close, and my heart swelled with hope. I grabbed the top of the boards and tugged with all the strength I had. Slowly, the boards slid downwards and to the side enough to put the window in full view. I almost cried I was so excited.

"The window was small and rusted, but I managed to open it with relative ease and climbed through. I was free...It felt so nice just to be outside and be able to explore on my own. I made my way down to the village and walked slowly, taking everything in.

"No one paid me much attention. Most of them were busy with work tending to their animals, selling wares, watching over their children, or working in small shops. I was fascinated with everything. My eyes couldn't take it in fast enough. I walked until I reached the end of the village and was about to turn around to go back when I saw a small shop, standing alone at the very end of the road.

"The sign was old and weathered, and it said *Brighton's Books*. My feet seemed to carry me inside of their own accord, and I was awed by what I saw.

"Covering every wall were shelves upon shelves filled with books of all sizes, shapes, and colors. I had never seen so many books...I didn't know where to look first. It was like walking into some sort of heaven. A lifetime's worth of books, right before me. I immediately began looking around, reading the titles.

“Suddenly I heard someone ask if they could help me with anything. I turned around and saw an old man looking at me. He was tall, with a kind face, small spectacles, and a shock of white hair growing in all directions. He reminded me of a big lion.” She paused, smiling at the memory.

“I told him no, that I was just looking around. I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to talk to anyone. I guess I was scared my parents would somehow find out. But he was so nice. He introduced himself as Barnaby Brighton, and I told him my name was Ana. I think he must have noticed how much I loved books, because he immediately engaged me in conversation about them. We talked for a long time. He showed me all sorts of fascinating books about spells, history, magical places and creatures. I wanted to read them all, but I told him I didn’t have any money.

“He just smiled and told me to come back tomorrow if I wanted. He didn’t get many customers these days, and it was nice to talk to someone who had as much passion for knowledge as he did. I agreed and went home. I couldn’t wait for the next day to come. It was nice to have somebody to talk to. I climbed back through my window and made sure the boards were back in place so it wouldn’t be discovered and for once in my life, I went to sleep with a smile on my face.

“The next day I went back to Mr. Brighton’s. He made tea, and we sat and talked for hours about everything...well, he did most of the talking actually. But that was fine with me. I didn’t offer any personal information, and he didn’t ask. He must have sensed it was a sensitive topic, I suppose. I merely told him that my family and I had moved here for a while and that my parents liked their privacy.

“He told me all sorts of stories about his travels and things he had seen and done. He had led a fascinating life. What I was most interested in, however, was when he talked about Hogwarts. He said it was a school for young witches and wizards to learn about magic, and that he had gone there as a boy. I had had no idea that there was an actual school like that. It sounded so wonderful.

"I think he must have then realized that I wasn't in school, and he asked me why I wasn't. I quickly lied and told him that I was home schooled. He must have bought it because he didn't ask any more questions about it.

"I had to lie to him. I didn't want to tell him something about myself or my parents that would put him in danger. I knew that if they found out that he knew something..." She broke off with a pained look on her face. Harry realized that she looked...guilty. *But why?* he wondered.

"Anyway, he noted my interest in the school, so he gave me a book about it called *Hogwarts: A History*. He told me I could keep it for as long as I wished. It...it was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me. I couldn't thank him enough."

Harry smiled at this. *Well, Hermione is sure going to like her...*

"I took the book home with me and read it until the sun sank beneath the trees. I hid it under a loose floorboard in my room so my parents wouldn't discover it. I read it from front to back, and then over again. It's how I learned about you and how wonderful a Headmaster you are," she said to Dumbledore, who smiled and nodded his head in thanks.

"I kept visiting Mr. Brighton every chance I could get. He grew to be like a father to me. The kind of father my true one never was. He let me borrow all sorts of books, which I brought home to read. It's how I learned about spells and how to cast them. I didn't have a wand, of course, but I nearly memorized them all just in case I did get one some day. I had nothing but time, so it was easy for me to read each book over and over again. It was all so fascinating to me.

"This continued for some time. We stayed in the cabin for a little over a year. I guess my parents thought it a fairly safe place to stay, and I was glad for it. I had made a friend, and life seemed to be bearable, unlike in the past. My parents were gone far more often, now, so it left less time for them to torment me. By the time they returned at night, I was usually asleep."

Here, Anabelle stopped and seemed to be struggling with something. Harry noticed that she looked reluctant to continue. Her red-rimmed

eyes filled with unshed tears, and he gave her hand another gentle squeeze. He knew that whatever she was about to say couldn't be anything good. He suddenly had the strangest urge to take her into her arms and tell her it was going to be okay, but he resisted. He knew she had to do this on her own.

Dumbledore also noticed her struggle, and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "It's alright, my dear. Go ahead," he said quietly.

Pomfrey looked concerned at Anabelle's pale complexion. "Perhaps she should finish the story another time, Albus. She's had far too much excitement for one day," she said, ever the worried nurse.

"It's alright," Anabelle said. "Really, I'm fine." Though she didn't sound very convinced.

Anabelle sniffed and tried to gather strength from the gentle, encouraging faces surrounding her. She took another deep breath and continued.

"One night...I came back from Mr. Brighton's with a new book. I read for hours on my bed. Normally, I would be extremely careful, and I would hide the book away before the sun set, just in case my parents returned early. I...I couldn't put this book down, however, so I...I kept reading for much longer than I usually did. My parents had come home extremely late the past couple of nights, so I thought it would be okay...

"I-I must have fallen asleep while I was reading it...because the next thing I remember is my parents standing over me with the book in their hands. They...they screamed at me...demanding to know where I had gotten it. I-I was so frightened. I'd never seen my father so angry..." Her breathing was ragged now, the tears threatening to fall at any moment.

"I...I tried to lie to them. I told them that I had found the book underneath an old floorboard. I knew I had given away my hiding space, but it was the only thing I could think of to say. My father...knew I was lying and demanded I tell him who had given it to me. I refused. He grabbed his wand and...threw the Crucio curse at me."

Madame Pomfrey gasped, her hand flying to her mouth in horror. Both Harry and Dumbledore stiffened visibly at the mention of the Unforgivable curse. Anabelle took no notice and continued shakily.

"It was the first time he had used magic to harm me, and the pain was...unbearable. He did it again and again, trying to force it out of me, but I-I refused to tell them. I blacked out after a while; the last thing I remembered was my father's livid face staring down at me."

Harry's grip on her hand tightened as a new respect for the girl grew in him. He knew what that curse felt like, but to endure it over and over again...He shuddered at the thought. And yet, even through all that she still managed to keep her secret safe. She was stronger than she looked, he realized.

"When I woke up, it was day. I picked myself up from the floor, and I...I noticed that my door was wide open. I was surprised, to say the least. I had figured that they would lock me in for days as a punishment. I...I knew something had happened when I was out. All of a sudden I had this horrible feeling, like...dread.

"I-I walked slowly into the other room. My parents were there, sitting at the kitchen table laughing and talking about the weather...as if nothing had happened. I...I didn't know what to think. I-it was so strange...I remember asking myself if last night had been a bad dream...if it hadn't happened after all. But I knew that wasn't true. I was aching all over...I could barely stand.

"They noticed my entrance and...said good morning. Never in my life had they ever said that to me. I just stared at them as if they were insane. My father had that horrible smile on his face again. I was so confused...I couldn't have spoken even if I had wanted to. And...and that's when I saw it," she shuddered and closed her eyes, as if willing the image from her mind.

"Sitting on the table, in full view, was a pair of spectacles. My world came crashing down as I recognized them immediately. They...they were...they were Mr. Brighton's." Two tears escaped her eyes as she stared straight ahead, her face otherwise devoid of emotion.

“And I just knew...” she whispered. “I knew that they had killed him. They had found him, somehow, and they...they—.” She broke off, unable to speak anymore as sobs wracked her body, and she fell apart before them all.

Her three listeners were still, all of them in horror and dismay at what the young girl had said.

Harry’s mouth hung open slightly in disbelief as rage coursed through his body at the pure evil that was her parents. But then, he knew all about evil...He realized that what her parents had done wasn’t entirely shocking, given what they were, but he’d never get used to the fact that Voldemort and his followers were capable of anything. Any evil one could imagine, they were capable of it. He was reminded of that every time he thought about his parents or looked in the mirror.

Concern eventually won over his rage as he looked down at the broken Anabelle before him. Without a thought, Harry sunk down onto the bed and gathered the girl into his arms, cradling her, gently rocking back and forth.

Anabelle collapsed in his arms and held on for dear life as the tears flowed in rivers down her face. It didn’t matter that she hardly knew him, or that Pomfrey and the famous Albus Dumbledore stood by watching. All that mattered was her need to feel safe and cared for, even though she knew she didn’t deserve any of it. But if for just a moment she could feel comforted...it would be enough to keep her going.

Harry simply held her, not really knowing what he should say, if anything. She was trembling now, and he wished there was something he could do to take her pain away. It was heartbreaking. Everyone else was still and silent, and for a while, no said anything.

As if coming to her senses, Anabelle untangled herself from Harry’s firm hold abruptly and distanced herself from him on the bed. Harry felt a little hurt by this, without really knowing why, but he allowed it. She sat against the headboard, her knees drawn to her chest, her eyes staring into nothingness.

"It was all my fault," she whispered painfully. "He...he died because of my carelessness. A poor, old, innocent man...and they killed him. But it might as well have been me who threw the curse at him." Her features were guilt-ridden, and it struck Harry that he had never seen anyone in so much pain or guilt.

Dumbledore shook his head at the girl sadly. He placed both of his hands gently on her shoulders, which forced her to look at him "No...no, Anabelle," he whispered. "You mustn't blame yourself for this. It is not your fault he was killed. It was your parents', and the evil that consumes them." At this she shook her head violently, about to voice her disagreement, but she was silenced by the stern, serious look in the Headmaster's eyes.

"Listen to me, Anabelle, and listen well, for this is something every witch and wizard must know. For all the love, and goodness, and friendship, and hope in this world, there is an evil...a hatred...that threatens to destroy it. People like Voldemort...people like your parents. *But we must not let them.* There will always be those who wish to perform this evil, and though we are fighting it, I am afraid it will never truly be gone. But it *can* be overcome.

"I see that you are pure of heart. You would have given your life to save his. You almost did when you refused to tell them about his existence. Do not forget that. You are filled with everything good they seek to conquer. You *must not* let them win by losing hope and blaming yourself for something they did. I am certain Mr. Brighton would not blame you. A bond like that is not easily broken.

"Guilt is a powerful emotion...but there are stronger things. Like love...like hope. Do not let it consume you, or you will be lost to the good forever. Hold on to the hope, Anabelle. Hold on to the friendship you had with Mr. Brighton and let that be your guide. Not guilt...never guilt."

Anabelle looked into the powerful wizard's eyes and saw the sincerity that lay in them. She wanted to believe everything he was saying. She wanted it to be true. But could she let it go so easily? She didn't think so.

"It won't be easy, Anabelle. But you must believe..." he said quietly, as if reading her mind. She looked up, astonished. How did he know?

She looked down at her hands and nodded. The tears were threatening to come again, and she willed herself to be strong. If she could summon half the strength and determination she saw in the Headmaster's eyes, then maybe she would be okay after all...

Dumbledore gave her a small smile and nodded as well, straightening again to his full height. "Good. I assume you and your parents changed locations again after this...incident, am I correct?" he asked carefully.

Anabelle broke from her daze at this and nodded again, not trusting herself enough to speak again quite yet.

"Of course, you don't have to continue if that is your wish..." he trailed off, knowing that it was all taking quite a toll on her.

"No," she spoke softly. "No, it's alright. The story's nearly finished now anyways, and I'd rather get it over with."

"Very well," he bowed his head, waiting patiently for her to continue.

"There's not much more to tell, really," she sighed. "We moved almost immediately after...after...well, you know," she whispered, and they all nodded in understanding.

"My parents hadn't spoken a word to me since that morning. I was still in shock at what had happened, so I barely noticed. We moved to an old, decrepit cabin in the middle of the woods. It looked like it had been there for over a century. It was tiny, too. It only had one room. I thought it odd. In the past, we had always stayed in or near a village, I suppose to make it seem less suspicious should someone come knocking at our door.

"But this cabin was in the middle of nowhere, it seemed. There was no village. No people. My parents were acting strangely. They were quiet...too quiet. I had made up my mind the second I found out about Mr. Brighton that I would try to escape them the first chance I got. I didn't care if it got me killed, or if I had no place to go. I just...I

couldn't stay with them...not after what they had done. But when we suddenly moved to this cabin, I feared they had discovered my plan or somehow guessed it. I figured they wanted to keep a closer eye on me...but I was wrong. So wrong.

"The first night we were there is when I learned my parents' true purpose for bringing me there. It was very late. My mother stood by the door, and my father stood in the middle of the room. He slowly pulled out his wand...and the look on his face was...it was filled with hatred and determination. All at once it dawned on me. They were going to kill me. That's why they had brought me there.

"He told me that I had become more trouble than I was worth. That it was time to get rid of me for good, seeing as how all I was to them was a burden. I tried to plead with him to let me go, and I told him I wouldn't tell anyone about them. He responded by throwing a curse at me, which threw me to the floor. He just...laughed and told me how stupid I was. I tried to get up, but he threw another curse at me.

"I cried out. I looked pleadingly at my mother, but she just stared and grinned at me. My father was about to hit me again when she told him to stop playing around and just finish me off.

"All I could do was stare as he pointed his wand at me, not saying a word. I knew I had to do something. I couldn't just lie there and watch as he threw the killing curse at me, so I gathered all the strength and courage I had and dove out of the way when he did. I picked myself up and ran. I think they were shocked for a moment, never thinking that I would fight back. I pushed past my mother and ran out the door. I could hear my father's scream of anger behind me as I ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

"I heard him run after me, but the forest was very dense there, and I was much smaller. I could fit between the trees easily, while they only slowed him down. I could hear him throwing curses left and right, but all I could do was run. I ducked and dodged behind trees and moved in all directions in an attempt to lose him and distance myself as far as possible from them.

"I ran and ran and ran, slowing down only for a second or two here and there to catch my breath, stumbling a few times. I got all sorts of

cuts and bruises, but I didn't even seem to feel them. I wasn't even aware of where I was going, but I knew I had lost them, after a while. But that didn't even matter. I was so filled with terror that I don't even think I could've stopped if I wanted to. It seemed like I had been running for hours. My heart was thundering in my chest, and I began to feel weak.

"The last thing I remember is running, terrified. I guess I must have collapsed. The next thing I knew, I was here...with you," she said, looking at Harry. "And...and that's it," she swallowed nervously.

There was a moment's silence as her grim words sunk in with everyone. Pomfrey was too stricken to speak, and Harry couldn't have even if he knew what to say. Anabelle merely stared down at her hands, afraid to look up to meet their eyes lest she found judgment in them.

Dumbledore broke the silence first, clearing his throat as he clasped his hands together, steeple-like, looking deep in thought. "Well, that is quite a tale, my dear. I must commend you for your bravery. You did well in escaping them, and I for one am very glad you did," he said sincerely.

At this Pomfrey nodded enthusiastically at the girl, and Harry gave a small smile, showing her he agreed wholeheartedly. Anabelle blushed and murmured a quiet thanks.

Dumbledore began to pace before her bed as he spoke on. "Now that your ordeal is over, I suppose the first order of business is figuring out what to do with you," he stopped, looking at Anabelle as he did so.

"I don't want to be a bother, sir. Please don't trouble yourselves; you have done more than enough for me as it is. I can't thank you enough, by the way," she said hastily, worry in her eyes.

"Now, now, my dear girl, it's quite alright. You are troubling no one, least of all me. We have done what was necessary and there is no need to thank us for it, though it is much appreciated. It just so happens that you have arrived here at Hogwarts at precisely the right time," Dumbledore smiled.

“Right time?” she asked, confused.

Pomfrey caught on to Dumbledore’s meaning and cut in excitedly. “Oh, Professor, of course! What a marvelous idea!” she exclaimed.

Anabelle looked from one to the other, her confusion growing. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I understand...”

Dumbledore’s smile grew, and the twinkle returned to his eye. “It is my understanding that when you read about Hogwarts, you wished you could be a student here, am I correct?”

“Well...yes,” she said cautiously. “Why?”

“The new term begins a week from now, and I must inform you that I am compelled to enroll you officially as a student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from this time forth,” he said business-like, the twinkle in his eye apparent as ever.

Anabelle couldn’t believe her ears. *Is this really happening? Am I dreaming?* She stared open-mouthed at the old, kind wizard before her; unable to speak she was so shocked.

“Of course, if you don’t want to accept, I understand...” the Headmaster trailed off, knowing full well what the offer had meant to her.

“No!” she nearly yelled. “I mean yes...yes I accept!” Tears of joy streamed down her face as she bolted from her bed, pain forgotten, to throw her arms around the Headmaster, unable to suppress her gratitude.

Dumbledore looked surprised at this for a moment, and then, in a rare show of affection, he smiled as he returned Anabelle’s hug. She released him and immediately did the same to Pomfrey who welcomed her with open arms. Finally she turned to Harry, who stood quietly next to her bed, smiling for all he was worth.

She threw her arms around his neck without thinking, and he enclosed his arms around her, laughing. It felt so good to see her happy. He wanted to hold her like that forever, laughing in joy. She

parted from him after a few, very long seconds, and shyly wiped her eyes.

“Thank you. Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to me. It’s all I’ve ever wanted,” she gushed to them, hardly believing she was to be a student at the famous school she had read about. She could learn magic, make new friends, and feel like she was actually a part of something. Yes, it was all she ever wanted and more.

“You are very welcome, Anabelle,” Dumbledore said kindly. “I will make all the arrangements and we’ll get you caught up. There is no need to worry about a thing. We could use an intelligent, brave, young witch like you. I have no doubt that you will be a marvelous student. You’ve most likely read all the books, anyway,” he jested, smiling.

Anabelle laughed. “I wouldn’t doubt it, but I’d be happy to read them again,” she said enthusiastically, which gained a merry laugh from everyone.

Dumbledore turned to Harry, then. “Harry, would you be willing to be Anabelle’s guide through all this? I can see she is already comfortable with you, and she’ll need to become familiar with Hogwarts. You could show her around, perhaps, introduce her to people, that sort of thing?”

“I’d be glad to,” Harry said, looking at Anabelle.

“Good,” the Headmaster nodded in approval. His smile soon faded, however, and his face turned more serious at his next words. “Anabelle, there is something else that needs to be addressed. It concerns your parents,” he paused, staring at her.

Anabelle’s short-lived joy plummeted at the mention of them, and her smile faded as well.

Dumbledore continued. “They will no doubt be looking for you, and it may be only a matter of time before they discover you’re here. You are very safe within these walls, but it never hurts to be cautious.

That is why we need to take some precautions before the term begins,” he said gravely.

Feeling numb at his words, she nodded wordlessly. She had no doubt that he was right, and she chided herself inwardly for forgetting it all so easily. They were still out there, and now they probably wanted to kill her more than ever. *What if they find me?* She shuddered at the thought of what they might do to her if they did.

“Firstly, you must not tell anyone who you really are, at least for now. While I am convinced of your safety here at Hogwarts, it wouldn’t do for your identity as a Carrows to come out. Many would jump to conclusions, and you would no doubt receive unwanted attention for it, not to mention the fact that it would make finding you easier for your parents. Of course, I’ll have to inform some of the teachers, but that is for your safety as they will be on the lookout for anything suspicious.

“Meanwhile, I will do all in my power to see your parents caught and put to justice for what they have done. They will not get away with this, Anabelle,” he stressed quietly. She nodded again, knowing it had to be done. They couldn’t be allowed to rampage and kill whomever they pleased.

“I can help,” she offered. “I’ll do whatever you ask of me. Anything—” she was cut off when Dumbledore hastily interrupted.

“No, my dear. You have helped immensely already simply by telling your story. Their cruelty to you, evasion of capture, and murder of Mr. Brighton, along with the witches, wizards, and Muggles we know they have killed, is helpful evidence which will come in handy at their trial. We may not have solid proof of everything, but I assure you, we will get it,” he told her, determination written on his face.

His words comforted her. He made it easy to believe him, and she did. She nodded that she understood, and he continued.

“Now, since your current identity is out of the question, we must provide you with a new one. It’s probably best that we stick with the home-schooled story. While it is unconventional, it is not unheard of and not a complete lie either, so it should be easy for you to keep up appearances.”

“What will she say about her parents?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore clasped his hands behind his back. “We’ll just say they are currently traveling abroad and could not, for whatever reason, take you with them, so they sent you here so you could have a proper education in the meantime. Again, not a complete lie, and I’m sure the students’ curiosity about you will wear off once the term moves along. Just keep details to a minimum, and I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Okay, I guess it sounds easy enough,” Anabelle said, trying to sound positive. The truth was, she was steadily growing more nervous about the situation. What if no one liked her? She was to be a new student, after all. What if she didn’t fit in? She tried to hide her fears behind a smile as Dumbledore continued.

Harry, unknown to Anabelle, had been studying her and saw the trepidation in her eyes that she was trying so hard to hide. *She’s scared*, he realized. *Of course she’s scared, she doesn’t know anybody. Well, I’ll just have to fix that*, he thought, determined to make sure Anabelle had a year she’d never forget.

“Now,” Dumbledore went on, “about your name...”

“My name?” she asked. “What about it?”

“Well, we’ll have to change it, of course. We can’t have an Anabelle Carrows on the list of students if you are trying to hide, now can we?” he said.

“Oh...right,” she said, feeling foolish for not realizing that that would be a problem.

“Do you have anything in mind, my dear? It is your name after all,” he asked her.

Anabelle frowned. She had no idea. How does one go about picking a new name for oneself?

Harry saw her hesitation and decided to jump in. “Well, how about you just keep the name Ana? I mean, it’s common enough not to arouse suspicion, and that way you won’t slip and get confused like if

AN: The Carrows are actually Death Eaters in the books, but I changed it up a bit, obviously. I think they are siblings in the novels, but I made Andromeda up and had her be married to Alecto. Sorry if that confused anyone. It just fit better with my story. Ta-ta for now!

Chapter 5

Soon after their talk, Dumbledore left the others so he could begin making the necessary arrangements for Ana to become an official student. Madame Pomfrey had insisted she get back into bed and rest, convinced the girl had over-exerted herself in the telling of her story.

Harry resumed his seat next to Ana's bed, promising Pomfrey that he wouldn't be a bother to her. Pomfrey relented, but only after Ana had pleaded with her to let Harry stay a while, at least until she fell asleep. She was feeling slightly drowsy from the medication Pomfrey had given her, but she wanted another chance to talk to Harry, ask him a few things. She wondered briefly why he wanted to stay with her at all, but quickly pushed the thought aside. It didn't matter *why* he was there, she was simply glad that he was.

When Pomfrey was finally satisfied that Ana was fine and needed no more fussing, she retired to her office, leaving the two alone.

They stared at each other for a moment, and then opened their mouths to speak at the same time.

"So—"

"I—"

They both stopped short, laughing at their simultaneous attempts to break the somewhat awkward silence.

"Ladies first," Harry grinned, somewhat embarrassed. He was making a right fool of himself, and he knew it. What was it about this girl that turned him into a blubbering idiot?

She sobered a bit, and then went on carefully. "I was just wondering if I was keeping you from something. Surely you have more important things to do than stay by my bed all day..." she gave a nervous laugh, and then continued hurriedly. "I mean, not that I don't appreciate it, I do...very much, actually. It's just...I don't want you to feel obligated or anything, I guess is what I'm trying to say."

“Are you kidding?” he scoffed. “I can’t even tell you how great it is to have someone to talk to that’s not a teacher. I’ve been bored stiff until you showed up. It’s been quite an eventful day, thanks to you,” he smiled at her.

Ana laughed, relieved. “That’s good to hear.” Then she frowned as something hit her. “Wait, so are you the only student here right now?”

“Fraid so,” he nodded.

“Why?”

Harry hesitated for a second, debating on how much he should tell her just yet. “Oh, uh, I had to come back early for some private lessons. I had to catch up on some things,” he replied vaguely.

Ana nodded and accepted his answer, deciding not to question him further. She didn’t want to pry. She hardly knew him, after all.

“I wasn’t lying before,” Harry said suddenly, eager to change the subject. “You’re really going to like it here. I can show you around, when you get well enough, I mean. There are tons of things to see. By the time school starts I’ll have you knowing every inch of this place like the back of your hand,” he told her excitedly.

“I can’t wait,” she smiled.

“You’ll fit in great. I’ll introduce you to my best friends, Ron and Hermione. I promise you’ll like them. You remind me of Hermione, actually. She’s obsessed with books, too,” he laughed. “Ron’s a riot. He’ll have you crying from laughing so hard.”

Ana laughed along with him, excited at the prospect of making new friends. The way Harry praised them made her like them already. She just hoped they liked her just as much.

She sat and listened in rapt attention as Harry described his friends in more detail, telling her how they had all met and how the two of them had been dating for a year now. She laughed when Harry told her how they bickered like an old, married couple, and she could hardly wait to meet them.

Suddenly Ana yawned, feeling exhausted despite her enjoyment of Harry's stories. "Sorry," she said, embarrassed.

Harry just laughed. "Don't apologize. You've had a long day," he said as he rose. "Get some rest. I know you must be tired. I'll come back tomorrow, I promise, okay?" It was getting dark, and he had to get to his lesson with Lupin, anyway.

"Okay," she gave a small smile as he nodded and began walking towards the door. She watched him go, but suddenly she had the urge to say one more thing.

"Harry?" she called out.

Harry stopped, turning to look at her. "Yeah?"

She paused, and then, softly, "Thank you...for everything."

Harry smiled warmly at her and gave her a wink that made her glad she was lying down. If she hadn't been, she was positive that her knees would have failed her.

Needless to say, she fell asleep with a big grin on her face.

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Meanwhile...

Rage such as he'd never felt before filled Aleto Carrows' being as he paced the small cabin in the dark woods.

"How could you let that little cretin get away?" he hissed at the still form of his wife, who was observing Aleto in her usual indifferent fashion from a chair near the only window.

At this accusation, however, a wrath engulfed her, making her eyes flash dangerously with indignation. She sprang from her chair and faced him with a vengeance that would have had most men cowering in fear.

“Me? You’re telling me it was *my* fault the little bitch got away? I’m not the one with the bad aim, *darling*,” she spat, saying the last word mockingly with a sugary sweetness that was anything but.

Alecto was not to be intimidated, however, and matched Andromeda’s fiery mood easily with his own.

“You were the one who was supposed to be guarding the door, *honeybunch*. I told you not to let her get past you!”

“How was I supposed to know the little coward was going to make a run for it? You should have killed her right away like I told you to instead of playing around with her like a fool!”

Alecto bit back a howl of fury and resumed his pacing, more determined than before and thinking hard.

Andromeda resumed her seat, picking at her fingernails, ignoring her husband’s incoherent mumbling. She sat there for a while with a bored air until his pacing and murmuring got too annoying to disregard.

She sighed in disgust, dropping her hands and glaring at him. “Would you stop that? Relax; she probably didn’t survive the forest, anyway. I don’t know why you’re so worked up about it.”

He turned to her with a tiresome glare. “Worked up? You don’t know why I’m so worked up?” he said with disbelief. “You of all people should know that we can’t afford to take any more chances. I’ll be damned if I’m going to be brought down all because of that good-for-nothing chit!”

Andromeda shrugged and started gazing at her fingernails again. “So we find her.”

Alecto turned to look out the window with a gleam in his eye. “Oh, we’ll find her all right. And when I get my hands on her she’ll be begging me on her knees to kill her,” he said vehemently, his mind working at a furious pace.

He smiled evilly as a plan began to form in his head. "You know, I rather hope she *is* alive. It's been quite a while since I had some fun," he laughed coldly. "Wouldn't you agree, sweetheart?" he asked her jeeringly, eyes still focused on the shadowy forest outside.

Andromeda merely rolled her eyes at him in scorn, focusing once again on her primping.

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Ana awoke then next morning to a wonderful, delicious smell that made her realize how hungry she was. She opened her eyes to find the surprising sight of Harry arranging a tray of savory-looking food on the stand next to her bed. She lay there for a moment and studied him, taking advantage of the fact that he had not yet noticed she was awake.

She could see that he was trying to be as quiet as humanly possible, as he had an intense look of concentration on his face, an adorable little crease between his brows. He bit his lip as he carefully straightened a small vase filled with gorgeous flowers. The motion was almost too much for Ana to take as her attention was drawn to his lips, and the image of him kissing her suddenly appeared in her head.

The thought was broken, however, when Harry's eager ministrations caused the vase to tip over with a loud clank, followed closely by a muttered curse from Harry.

Ana couldn't help herself, and she immediately began shaking with laughter she was desperately trying to hold in.

Startled, Harry glanced over at her and turned red when he saw that she was awake and had seen his clumsy efforts. He laughed in embarrassment, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

"Morning," he smiled sheepishly.

Ana had finally gotten her laughter under control and smiled at him with mirth-filled eyes. "Good morning."

"I'm glad you find my complete and utter idiocy amusing," he narrowed his eyes at her, trying his hardest to look angry but failing miserably as a grin crept onto his face.

This brought on another peal of bright laughter from Ana, and Harry couldn't help but join in. The sound was contagious.

"As a matter of fact, I do," she teased him, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Your idiocy is *very* amusing," she joked as another laugh escaped her.

Harry merely smirked and grunted as he turned to pick up the tray, up-righting the flowers as he did so.

"Your breakfast, milady," he said properly, and with a playful grin he placed the tray gently on Ana's lap with a bow.

Ana smiled at this, but the smile turned to a look of awe as she looked down at the food. It looked incredible, and the aroma that reached her nostrils left her mouth watering. There was bacon, scrambled eggs, sausage, muffins, toast with butter and jam, and a big glass of orange juice. She was never allowed such luxuries before, and it took all her self-control not to immediately start devouring it all.

"Harry, this looks wonderful! You didn't have to do all this..." she said.

Harry blushed and shrugged. "Well, technically I didn't do it. I just went down to the kitchens and had the house elves cook some things up for you. They were happy to do it, really. And I just thought it would be nice for you to have a good breakfast your first morning here. It was nothing, really..." he trailed off, giving her a humble half-smile.

She looked at him and smiled. "Well, thank you," she said sincerely. "You've been so kind to me. This really is a treat for me...and oh! Look at the flowers! They're so beautiful..." she gushed as she studied the bouquet of sweet-smelling blossoms which were a pearly pink in color.

"Those are from Hagrid," Harry explained as he sat down on the chair next to her bed. "I went to visit him this morning, and he asked me to

give them to you and told me to tell you to get well soon. He picked them himself.”

“He did?” she asked, surprised. “How nice! You must thank him for me. They really are beautiful...” She studied the flowers anew, marveling at the kind gesture from someone she hadn’t even technically met. It gave her a warm feeling thinking about it and for a moment she thought she might tear up.

Harry saw the genuine appreciation on her face and smiled. “You can thank him yourself. I’ll take you to go see him when you’re well enough. He’d really like that.”

Ana’s face brightened at the prospect. “Oh, can we? That would be wonderful, Harry!”

“Sure,” he grinned. “Now eat up. Your food’s going to get cold.”

“Aren’t you going to eat too?” she asked.

“Nope. Had my breakfast already. Early riser. Now eat!” he commanded with a smile.

She didn’t need to be told twice. She dug into the food, realizing how truly hungry she was. She couldn’t remember the last time she had eaten a good, solid meal. It was delicious. Harry laughed at her eagerness, glad that she was enjoying it.

“So, Harry,” she began after swallowing a bite of toast. “What do you do for fun? I mean, what are your...you know, hobbies?” She took a bite of bacon and looked at him. She was desperately trying to hide how curious she was of him. There were millions of things she wanted to ask and this seemed like a good start.

Harry had leaned forward with his elbows resting on his knees, thinking. “I dunno. I guess there’re lots of things. I like hanging out with my friend’s. I like going to Hogsmeade, drinking butterbeer, playing wizard’s chess with Ron, though I have no idea why since he always beats me, and rather horribly, too,” he laughed, running his hand through his hair. “But I like flying the best. Playing Quidditch.”

"You play Quidditch?" she asked, amazed.

"Yeah, you know about Quidditch?" It was his favorite thing to talk about, and he got excited that she knew what it was.

"Oh, well, just what I've read," she shrugged. "I've never actually seen it played, of course, but it sounds exciting."

Harry grinned. "It's great. You're going to love it, trust me. You can come to all the games now," he said energetically.

"Gosh, that would great. So, what, er, position are you?" she asked a little uncertainly. She wasn't sure if she could remember the positions and what each one did, but she was hoping it would come back to her.

"Seeker," he responded proudly.

"Seeker," she repeated. *Oh gods, which one is that? Is that the one that hits the...badgers? Bodgers? No, that's not it. Ugh, why can't I remember!*

Harry looked at her expectantly, but upon seeing her confusion, he gave her a reassuring grin. "I catch the Snitch."

Snitch? Oh! The Snitch! Of course!

"That's the little golden ball, right?" she asked hopefully.

Harry nodded. "Yup, that's the one."

"Wow...you must be very good. As I recall, that's the most difficult position, isn't it?" she asked, impressed.

Harry blushed. "Oh, I don't know about that. The others do most of the work. I mainly hover around above everyone until I spot it, which sometimes takes a while."

But Ana would not be deterred. "Yes, but you must be an excellent flyer. To go after something so small and fast, I mean."

Harry scratched his head and gave a chuckle. "Yeah, I guess."

She smiled, watching as he ran his hands through his mussed up hair again. *If he keeps doing that I think I might faint*, she thought.

"I can't imagine what that must feel like. Flying, I mean. I've always wondered..." she said after a moment.

A change immediately came over Harry at the mention of flying. She could tell just by looking at his face that it meant a lot to him.

"It's...it's almost unexplainable. It's like nothing else in the whole world," he said passionately. "When I fly, I feel like I can do anything...go anywhere. It's like I'm in my own little world when I'm up there. It's...freedom," he said quietly, a far off look in his eyes.

"Freedom," she whispered reverently. "I've never known what it's like to feel free. Even now..." Sadness filled her gray eyes, and she frowned, wringing her hands nervously.

Harry's heart ached as he looked at her. She'd been through so much...Too much. Sure, he'd led a rough life, too, rougher than most, but he had people who cared about him. People who loved him. He had Ron and Hermione, Sirius and Lupin, Dumbledore, Hagrid. He had the memory of his parents. He had their love. Ana didn't even have that. She didn't really have anything.

Reaching out, he stilled her hands with his own. She stiffened at the sudden contact, but relaxed seeing the calm kindness in his eyes.

"I'll take you sometime. Flying," he whispered.

"I think I'd like that." Ana stared at him with a small smile, and for a moment both were silent.

He must be an angel, she thought wonderingly. *Only an angel would be so kind and forgiving. I don't know what I did to deserve it. Can I trust him?*

She wasn't sure. A part of her wanted to open up to him and trust him completely...and another part wanted to shut him out before he got too close. She didn't think she'd survive another emotional blow, and a broken heart would be just that.

Harry gazed at the beautiful girl before him and felt his heart give a funny little extra beat at the sight. Every instinct in his body cried out for him to do all he could to help her. To protect her. On some level, they were the same. As far as Harry was concerned, neither of them had parents. His were dead and hers were never really parents to begin with. At least not what parents should be.

They were alone in this world together, and it gave Harry some comfort in knowing that there was someone out there who could relate to him. All his friends knew what it was like to be loved and encouraged by a mother or father. Well, except maybe Neville, but even he had a grandmother who raised and loved him. Harry didn't even have that.

All he had growing up was the Dursley's, and their hatred of him. But when Hogwarts came along, all that changed. His friends became his family, and it helped him get through the rough times. He was determined to give that to Ana as well, now. He knew that she would need it just as he had.

He withdrew his hands reluctantly and ran them through his hair again, needing to occupy them with something else.

Ana felt a strange sense of loss when he moved his hand and quickly tried to brush the odd feeling away. She glanced up at him and giggled suddenly at the state of his hair. There was one stubborn lock that was sticking straight up in the front, making Harry look quite humorous.

Harry looked at her smiling face and tried to figure out what was so funny. "What is it?" he frowned, looking down at his shirt, thinking he may have spilled something on it earlier without realizing.

Ana just laughed more at this. "Come here," she said, leaning forward a bit.

Confused, Harry leaned forward too. Ana reached out her hand and smoothed the stray strand down as best she could, inwardly marveling at how soft and silky his hair was. She retracted her hand slowly and gave him a soft smile.

She stilled, however, when she looked at his forehead. Some strands had been pushed away in her efforts of getting the one smoothed down, and now his lightening-shaped scar was in full view.

She frowned as she stared at it, her thoughts brought back to what Dumbledore had said about it.

“How did you get that?” The words came spilling out of her mouth before she could stop them, and she immediately regretted the question when he visibly stiffened and sat back in his chair, further distancing himself from her.

He knew immediately what she was referring to and furrowed his brows as a pained expression came to his face as he tried to think of how he should respond.

Ana flushed, inwardly berating herself for asking such a personal question. “I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “You don’t have to answer that. I shouldn’t have asked. Forgive me for prying.”

“No,” he said quietly. “No it’s...it’s fine. You trusted me enough to let me hear your story. I should repay you the same courtesy.”

His eyes were downcast, and Ana wished she could disappear. Here they were getting along great and she had to ruin it by opening her big mouth again.

“Harry, really, it’s okay. If you don’t want to talk about it, I completely understand...”

Harry looked up at her finally; his eyes were dark with sadness and conflict. “No, I want to tell you...really. Better you hear it from me than someone else. It’s just...I’ve never really had to before. Everyone knows the story already. I...I’m not sure where to begin,” he said, confused.

It was true. Harry had never needed to tell anyone his story. He had been famous his entire life. There was not a witch or wizard who didn’t know who he was. Ana was the only person he’d ever met who had no idea. Suddenly he knew how she felt before telling her story and could relate to her reluctance to tell it. It’s not an easy thing to

relive your worst memories. But, somehow, knowing that she had been through rough times, too, gave him strength to continue.

Harry sighed and began. "I was just a baby when I received this scar. My parents were wizards...well known and respected. One night Voldemort came to our home. He was very powerful then...there was nothing they could do. He...killed them both." Harry swallowed painfully, and Ana gasped.

"My father died trying to protect us. Voldemort killed him without a second thought. And my mother...my mother sacrificed herself to save me," he said, the pain in his voice replaced with anger as his fists clenched tightly.

"With them out of the way, Voldemort focused his attention on me. He threw the killing curse at me...but, somehow, I survived. Something happened that night that changed everything. As far as I understand, something passed from Voldemort to me, stripping him of his powers and leaving me with this scar you see."

Ana was dumbstruck. He survived the killing curse? He was the reason for Voldemort's downfall? No wonder her parents hated him...

"It was my mother's sacrifice," he said quietly, tears threatening for the first time. But none fell as he went on. "Her love...their love...saved me."

Ana reached out for his hand as he had done for her and held it gently. It was the least she could do. Harry held on tight, needing it more than he was willing to admit and continued.

"After that, Dumbledore sent me to live with my Aunt and her family, the Dursley's. They were muggles and for the first eleven years of my life I grew up knowing nothing of the wizarding world, Voldemort, or the true circumstances of my parents' death. The Dursley's were horrible to me. They treated me like dirt, but it was all I knew at the time, so I did my best to get through it.

"The day Hagrid came along and told me that I was a wizard was one of the best of my life. But when I learned that everyone in the entire wizarding world knew who I was, I was shocked. I was recognized by

everyone. My scar was the symbol of good conquering evil. They all wanted to meet "The Boy Who Lived." That's what they called me. Hagrid told me about my parents and Voldemort. He told me how I got my scar, and that I was praised for being a savior. It was the strangest thing, being famous for something you don't even remember. For something so awful," he added ruefully.

"I hated it. I still do, though by now I've learned to get used to it. I would get angry at them for being so happy about it. My parents were dead, and all they could do was rejoice over the defeat of the Dark Lord. It was selfish, and I know better now, but it still hurts. I just wish I could have known them..." he hung his head, trying not to cry, and Ana's heart went out to him.

"Oh Harry..." she whispered, tears coming to her own eyes. She squeezed his hand, feeling helpless as he sat there in misery.

Harry cleared his throat and went on. "Hagrid brought me here, and I was truly happy for the first time. I made friends, learned magic, played Quidditch. It was great. But Voldemort was still alive, and I soon learned that he wanted to kill me. He wanted revenge for what I had done to him. When he learned I was at Hogwarts he did all in his power to finish me off. Each year he gains more power and attempts something, but so far I've managed to stop him each time..." he trailed off.

Ana was speechless. He was a hero. *But at great cost*, she thought sadly. She couldn't imagine what life must be like for him. To struggle with the loss of his parents while at the same time trying to defeat the evil wizard who killed them...it was staggering. What shocked her the most, however, was that he was her age. She realized that he must have immense strength and courage to have made it through it all. She wasn't sure she would have, and a strong respect grew in her for him.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she said, finally. "What you've gone through...I can't imagine how hard it's been for you," she shook her head, distraught, but gasped as she remembered her earlier question to him.

“Oh gods, and here I was asking you if your father was named Harry! No wonder you looked at me like I had two heads. I’m so sorry,” she blurted, feeling so ashamed she wanted to cry. “I feel like such a fool...” she whimpered, covering her face with her hands and suddenly wishing she knew how to apparate.

Harry jumped into action when she saw how distraught she was, moving to sit next to her on the bed and pulling her hands down to hold them in his own. “Ana, you have nothing to be sorry about. You didn’t know. Don’t worry, I’m not upset. It just surprised me, is all. You’re the first person I ever met who had no idea who I was. It...it was actually kind of nice. I was expecting the usual scream or gushing about how ‘wonderful it was to meet me’ when I told you my name. I was just Harry to you...not ‘The Boy Who Lived’,” he told her softly, looking into her eyes with a sincerity that took her breath away.

She sniffed as she looked back at him. “You still are ‘just Harry’ to me,” she whispered.

Harry felt his heart swell at her words, and felt the strongest urge to kiss her. Something stopped him, however, and instead, he smiled and lifted his hand to wipe her tears away.

“No more crying,” he told her. “I hate it when girl’s cry...”

She laughed. “Sorry,” she replied with a sheepish smile. “I really don’t cry this often, I promise.”

Harry grinned. “Well, I promise you I’ll fix that. You’re at Hogwarts now, and there’s no crying allowed, got it? Only having fun and making mischief are permitted,” he said with a glint of humor in his eye.

She smiled at this. “Well, if you say so...”

Harry nodded vehemently. “I do. Very strict rules here, you know,” he winked, causing her to laugh again. Harry joined in, but stopped as he looked at the clock.

Time for another lesson, he thought, disappointed that he’d have to leave her.

“Shoot, I’m gonna be late,” he said, rising from the bed regretfully.

Ana frowned at this. “Late?” she asked. “For what?”

Harry turned to her. “I’ve got a lesson. Can’t miss it, unfortunately.”

“Oh,” she said softly, disappointed. *Stop it. You can’t expect him to stay with you every waking second, can you?*

Harry saw the disappointment on her face and for a moment debated not going, even though he knew he had to. Sirius was taking great risk in coming to Hogwarts just to teach him. But it was still hard leaving her...

“I’ll come back when I’m done, okay? Hey, I know! I can bring you some books from the library, and I’ll teach you how to play Wizard’s Chess. How does that sound?” he asked, excited at the prospect.

His eagerness to please her made her smile wholeheartedly, and she asked herself again what she had done to deserve such kindness. “That sounds great, Harry.”

“Good,” he said, grinning like an idiot. He continued to look at her as he backed up, still smiling. “I’ll be back soon.”

Ana laughed and gave him a small wave. He turned around, only to bump into one of Madame Pomfrey’s carts. Ana brought her hand to her mouth, trying to stifle the laughter in her throat as he turned back towards her with an embarrassed chuckle.

“Okay, I’m leaving now,” he brushed a hand through his hair as he continued to smile foolishly, feeling like git.

“Bye,” she choked out through her laughter. She watched him go and soon lost herself in thought, a smile still plastered on her face. She sighed and eagerly awaited his return, wondering what this boy had done to her.

Chapter 6

“You’re smiling.”

Harry looked up from his resting position on the floor at a disbelieving Sirius, who at the moment looked as though he’d just been Confunded.

“You were ten minutes late for the first time since I’ve been giving you these lessons, you missed at *least* three easy blocks that you would have brushed off with no problem under normal circumstances, you *dropped* your sword twice, and your *smiling?*”

Harry shrugged, the smile not leaving his face. “Everyone has an off day, Sirius,” he said, and far too happily for Sirius’ taste.

Harry had tried his hardest to concentrate during the lesson, really he had, but the harder he tried, the more Ana’s radiant face appeared in his head. As for the smile, he hadn’t even realized he’d been doing it. It seemed that was just his natural reaction to his thoughts about her. He didn’t think he’d be able to get rid of it if he tried.

Sirius scoffed and was about to berate Harry for his horrible performance when a sudden thought struck him, causing him to beam knowingly.

“It’s the girl, isn’t it? You fancy her! Oh, why didn’t I see it before?” he laughed, shaking his head at himself.

Harry’s smile disappeared, and he looked at Sirius, dumbstruck. “H-how did you know?”

“Well, come on, Harry. Only a girl would put a smile like that on a man’s face. She pretty?” he asked with a sly wink.

Harry’s face turned beet red. “I didn’t mean that! I meant how did you know about Ana?”

“Oh, Ana, is it? You two are good friends already, I see,” Sirius nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

“Sirius,” Harry said warningly.

This brought out a laugh from the older man who held up his hands in mock defense. “All right, all right. Dumbledore told me all about it yesterday. He informed the rest of the Order about the situation, as well. I thought he told you that?” Sirius finished, brows furrowed in question.

“Oh yeah,” Harry said with a frown. “I guess he did.”

Harry chided himself inwardly for forgetting that. Of course Dumbledore would inform the Order about Ana. She was a Carrows, after all. It hadn’t even crossed his mind to tell Sirius about her, and he realized suddenly that his godfather might be a little hurt that he hadn’t.

“Sirius, I meant to tell you, really. I wanted to, it’s just, I didn’t know who she was at first, and I thought Dumbledore should be the one to tell you. I didn’t want to worry you over nothing...” he said quickly, feeling awful for not opening up to him about the girl and who she was.

Sirius held up a hand in a placating manner and gave a small smile. “Harry, it’s alright. You did the right thing. If you had told me yesterday, I probably would have barged into that hospital room like a madman and scared the poor girl to death in questioning her before getting the real story. I understand. Actually, your atrocious performance today made me forget all about it, to tell you the truth,” he said, grinning good-naturedly.

Harry blushed, running a hand through his hair. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Yes, well, I suppose I can allow it this one time, but in the future you must not allow yourself to be distracted. Your mind must be clear in order to fight, Harry. Your enemies will not show you mercy as I have,” he said grimly, staring at him in all seriousness.

Harry nodded, knowing he was right and feeling a bit foolish because of it.

Sirius clapped him on the back, smiling again as he helped the boy up. "So...what's she like?" he asked innocently.

Harry stared at him suspiciously for a moment before answering. "She's...nice," he said vaguely.

"Nice?" Sirius asked, eyebrows raised in query, waiting for him to say more. When Harry simply looked at him, he gestured with his hands for him to go on. "And...?"

"And what?" Harry said, looking anywhere but at his godfather, trying to seem disinterested.

Sirius sighed impatiently. "That's it?"

Harry fidgeted, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. "She's...she's great," he said finally, a small smile on his face. "She's funny, and smart, and brave, and...and great," he shrugged, eyes glued to his feet, feeling his cheeks start to burn.

"Great, huh?" Sirius grinned with a glint of mischief in his eye.

Harry saw this and scowled at his godfather, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. "Shut up," he mumbled, even more embarrassed.

Sirius laughed loudly and clasped an arm around Harry's shoulder. "Forgive me, Harry. I'm sure she's lovely. Now, get going. I'm sure your lady is eagerly awaiting your return," he said, pushing Harry towards the door.

Harry's scowl deepened as he sent his grinning godfather a glare, walking determinedly out the door. "I'm not listening," he said over his shoulder to the increasingly amused Sirius.

Harry began walking down the hall, trying to put as much distance between him and his godfather as possible.

"Oh Harry!" Sirius shouted from the doorway at Harry's retreating back, unable to resist taunting him a little more. "Give her a kiss for me, would you?" he jested, laughing even more when Harry stopped

dead for a split second before continuing on even more hurriedly without looking back.

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU!” Harry yelled, putting his hands over both ears, desperately trying to drown out Sirius’ roar of laughter.

Sirius was doubled over. “Oh come on, Harry! I was only joking!” he yelled, still trying to stop laughing. But Harry had turned the corner, hands still over his ears.

Sirius chuckled again, wiping some tears of laughter from his eyes.

“Kids,” he said, shaking his head, laughing all over again when he pictured Harry’s scowling face.

He couldn’t help but feel proud of his godson. It was written all over the boy’s face, even though he probably didn’t know it.

The young man was besotted with this girl, whoever she was.

It’s about time, Sirius thought with a happy smile before moving back to the room to gather up the equipment.

It’s about time...

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There was no doubt about it. Pomfrey was driving her crazy.

Ana couldn’t help but be fond of the well-meaning nurse, but there was only so much fussing a person could take. She’d been checking Ana’s injuries and forcing her to drink these truly horrid potions every 15 minutes, it seemed. Ana was grateful, but she was suddenly wishing very much for Harry to come back, preferring his easy-going presence to Madame Pomfrey’s frantic worrying.

“Madame Pomfrey, really, I’m fine,” Ana said, exasperated, though trying her best to hide it.

Pomfrey was currently holding the girl's face in her hands as she dabbed some sort of foul-smelling ointment on the cut on her forehead. Pomfrey, however, acted as if she hadn't heard her and simply continued tending to the cut, intensely focused.

Ana almost breathed an audible sigh of relief when she heard the doors open and turned her head to see Harry walking through them, arms filled with items.

"Harry!" she said brightly, before Pomfrey snapped her head back to where it had been, undaunted by the interruption. Ana gulped and tried to stay still, seeing the stern look in the woman's eyes. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Harry drew closer and set the books and chessboard he had brought down on the table next to Ana's bed, smiling and feeling very sorry for her as he watched Pomfrey finish up. He'd been in this room many times and knew what it was like to be subjected to Madame Pomfrey's mother hen-like qualities.

Pomfrey carefully replaced the bandage on Ana's head and straightened, her eyes focusing in on the things Harry had brought with him for Ana.

"Mr. Potter, I do hope that none of these items will cause any undue stress or over-exertion on the behalf of young Ms. Brighton here..." she trailed off meaningfully, shooting an inquiring glance at him.

Harry looked at the books and seemed to frown in confusion. "Stress and over-exertion? But I didn't bring any of Lockhart's books..." he said, looking confused.

At this, the ice seemed to melt around Pomfrey, and she chuckled, shaking her head at the now grinning Harry.

"Harry," she said reproachfully, but her eyes shone with what was very clearly amusement. "Actually I was referring to the chessboard..." she said.

Harry surreptitiously moved in front of the table, hiding the game from view. "What chessboard?" he said innocently, and Ana almost burst out laughing.

Pomfrey gave him a stern look, but simply "Hmph'd" and walked away shaking her head and muttering something about teenagers, doing a terrible job at hiding the small grin that spread across her face as she walked towards her office

The highly amused Ana turned to look at Harry. "What chessboard?" she asked dubiously, laughter in her eyes.

Harry shrugged. "It worked didn't it?"

She snorted and moved to sit up straighter, but was cut short when a sharp pain in her side made her wince. She tried to hide her discomfort, but Harry saw it and moved nearer.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concerned. He lightly touched her arm, and the pain was immediately forgotten as the contact sent shivers up and down her spine.

She cleared her throat, brushing the odd feeling away and giving him a smile to let him know she was okay. "I'm fine. I guess I'm just a little sore still. It's nothing..."

"I don't need to be calling Pomfrey back in here, do I?" he asked teasingly with a grin.

Her eyes widened, and she reached for him as he made to start walking towards her office. "No! Gods, Harry, anything but that, please. I love the woman but she's been driving me mad all morning," she whispered distressfully, looking anxiously in the direction of Pomfrey's office as if fearing she would appear again at any second.

Harry laughed and moved back to her side to start sorting through the things he had brought, pulling up a chair. "I was only joking, Ana. Trust me, I wouldn't be so cruel as that," he chuckled, looking at her mirthfully. He paused for a second, thinking, and said, "You should've seen your face though..."

He ducked, laughing as one of Ana's pillows came flying at his head.

"It's not funny, Potter," she said, trying to sound angry but ending up laughing as well. "So what'd you bring me?" she asked excitedly, honing her sights on the books on the table.

"Well, it just so happens that today is your lucky day," he grinned at her. "I brought some books from the library, though I wasn't sure what you liked, so sorry if they're a bit random."

"No, are you kidding? *Anything* is great, Harry. You didn't have to go to such trouble. I wish there was something I could do for you in return," she told him gratefully.

"Well, that's why I brought the Wizard's Chess, of course. It's for my own personal benefit, you see. I've never won a game in my life, and I figured you'd be easy to beat since you've never played before," he said, only half-joking.

Ana's mouth hung open in shock as he said this, smiling as she laughed in disbelief. "Gee, how awfully kind of you, Mr. Potter," she said sarcastically.

Harry cracked up, finding it highly amusing and dodged as the pillow once again came flying towards his head.

"Prat," she laughed. "Fine, let's play, then. You never know...I might surprise you," she told him, raising her chin sagely before laughing again, tucking a stray hair behind her ears.

His laughs subsided, and Harry stared at her for a moment, a funny look in his shining green eyes. "You just might..." he said quietly, forgetting all about the game.

Ana's smile slowly faded as their eyes met. She blinked and broke the contact, clearing her throat and looking down at her hands. Her heart was beating wildly, and she had no idea why.

Harry too, broke from the trance and grabbed the chessboard, quickly setting it up while explaining the rules to her, as though nothing had happened.

Ana was grateful for the distraction and soon forgot all about the slightly awkward moment as she became engrossed in the chess pieces and rules of the game. She would interrupt Harry every few seconds with a question, finding it all fascinating. She knew what chess was, of course, but like Harry had said, she'd never played it.

Once she was sure she understood it, for the most part, they began a game.

"This is kind of fun," Ana smiled as she moved a pawn forward.

Harry smiled evilly. "Just wait, it gets even better..."

Ana didn't have to wait long to discover what Harry meant by that, because she soon thereafter watched, horrified, as one of Harry's pawns demolished her own...literally. She shrieked in surprise as her pawn's head was chopped off, while the rest of it was reduced to mere rubble.

Harry was grinning happily, looking very proud of himself as Ana looked on, astonished.

"It's a bit...violent, don't you think?" she swallowed, afraid to make her next move.

"That's what makes it fun!" he said enthusiastically, completely oblivious to her shocked expression and studying the board, waiting for Ana's next move.

"If you say so..." she shrugged, moving her next piece.

As the game moved on and became even more violent, Ana grew increasingly amused. She was losing horribly, and the whole 'mauling-the-other-player-until-there-was-nothing-but-bits-and-pieces-left' thing wasn't exactly her cup of tea, but she was having fun none-the-less.

Harry was enjoying the hell out of himself, finally winning for the first time, and just seeing the bright smile on his face put a similar one on her own.

Not surprisingly, Harry won the first game, throwing his hands in the air triumphantly as he did.

Ana laughed as she watched him, and Harry looked at her, feeling sheepish. "Sorry," he grinned.

"Don't be sorry. You won fair and square. I'm just glad I was responsible for your first win," she smiled at him, meaning it.

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, thanks for that."

“Well, don’t get used to it, I’m sure to win this time,” she said challengingly.

"You're on," he beamed. He set up the board, and they began another game, talking and laughing as they did so.

Harry told her all about the time he'd had to *really* play this game in his first year at Hogwarts, and his ordeal with the Sorcerer's Stone. Ana listened, amazed, as he described the year's events and his encounter with Voldemort. She hung on to his every word, finding it incredible that he had gone through all *that* when he was only eleven.

They played for hours, Harry's voice echoing throughout the open room as he told her about the teachers at Hogwarts, describing each one in detail to her so she'd be prepared. Ana won only one time, but she was far too enthralled by what Harry was telling her to really notice. In fact, it was probably the most fun she'd had since...well, since ever, she realized.

When night fell, and Harry finally took his leave of her, she found herself unable to sleep, though she was very tired. Her thoughts were awirl with the day's events and the things Harry had told her. She lay for hours thinking about it, and when sleep finally claimed her, her dreams were filled with three-headed-dogs, disgruntled potion masters, giant chess pieces, and a certain green-eyed, smiling boy triumphing over evil.

[illegible]

Later that night...

Sirius looked around tiredly at the other Order members gathered around his kitchen table in the basement of his home at Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore had called a late meeting together to discuss the Carrows' situation, and everyone was now chatting idly while waiting for the Headmaster to appear.

It had been a long day for Sirius. After Harry's lesson, he returned home hoping to relax only to be forced to deal with Kreacher, who was being particularly obstinate today. There was still much to be done in regards to the upkeep of the decrepit house, and Kreacher wasn't helping any with his loud objections and generally nasty disposition.

It was no surprise that he had conveniently disappeared the moment Order members began arriving. It was no secret that the house-elf despised them all and was completely against such meetings at the Black house.

Sirius wasn't complaining, though, and was only too happy to be relieved of his presence for the time being. And as much as he wanted to go to bed right now, Sirius was willing to push all thoughts of rest aside for the sake of this meeting. Dumbledore hadn't gone into specifics when he told them all about what needs to be done, and Sirius was eager to learn more about what he, personally, could do to make sure the elusive Carrows were caught and put to justice.

Sirius' good friend, Remus Lupin, sat beside him at the table, looking his usually calm self. Scattered about the room also were several other prominent members of the Order, including Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Alastor Moody, Arthur Weasley, Elphias Doge, Dedalus Diggle, and Rubeus Hagrid.

Sirius noted with private amusement that Lupin was currently staring at Tonks, who was having a quiet conversation with Shacklebolt and therefore oblivious to his penetrating gaze. To save his friend the embarrassment he would almost certainly feel if Tonks noticed, Sirius decided to engage Lupin in conversation.

"How was your private lesson with Harry tonight?" he asked quietly.

Lupin abruptly tore his gaze from the pretty, purple-haired witch to meet Sirius' inquiring glance. He shifted in his seat and wondered briefly if his friend had noticed his attentions towards their fellow Order member.

All doubts in his mind were wiped away, however, as he saw a knowing glint in Sirius' eyes despite his indifferent attitude, which made Lupin feel rather embarrassed. He should have known that something like that wouldn't have escaped Sirius' notice and reprimanded himself inwardly for allowing his thoughts about Tonks to wander so freely.

To save himself further embarrassment, Lupin decided to pretend like nothing was out of the ordinary, and that he hadn't just been staring at Tonks as though she were a large glass of water and he was a man dying of thirst.

"It went well," he answered, his thoughts going back to the lesson with Harry he had only just returned from. "His skills are improving more and more each day. It's quite remarkable, actually. For his age...well, it's very impressive. Though now that I think about it, he did seem a bit...distracted tonight. I can't imagine why," he said, frowning slightly.

At this, Sirius grinned, realizing that Lupin hadn't put two and two together as he himself had done earlier that day in regards to Harry's curious behavior.

"You mean you don't know? I thought it was quite obvious..." he trailed off aloofly.

"What do you mean?" Lupin frowned.

Sirius smiled sardonically as he turned his head to face Lupin. "Let's just say that if Harry and the girl were sitting at this table right now, he'd be giving your amorous stares a run for their money, if you know what I mean" he winked, speaking quietly.

Lupin turned a bright shade of scarlet at this, not knowing whether to be angry or astonished by what Sirius had said. Eventually his shock

won over, however, and he chose to ignore Sirius' teasing for the moment.

"Girl? As in the *Carrows* girl?" he asked, astounded.

"Shhh, keep your voice down! I've already embarrassed the poor boy about it enough," Sirius admonished, looking around to see if anyone had noticed his friend's outburst.

Lupin was stunned. "He *told* you this?"

"Of course not. I merely made an observation, and his reaction confirmed my suspicions," Sirius said matter-of-factly.

"But...but it's only been a day!" he sputtered, disbelief written in his features.

Sirius looked at him chidingly. "My dear Remus, have you forgotten what it's like to be Harry's age?"

Lupin blinked at this, realizing that his friend was right. He looked down at the table, frowning slightly as he contemplated this surprising revelation further.

"Look," Sirius went on. "I didn't say the boy was in love or anything, he just likes her. Though he probably doesn't even know it yet, since he seemed genuinely mortified when I insinuated it. Personally, I think it's wonderful," Sirius smiled. "Apparently, she's 'great'," he grinned knowingly at him.

A whirlwind of conflicting emotions rushed through Lupin as he listened to Sirius' words. The frown on his face deepened as he decided to voice his uncertainties aloud.

"I don't know if it *is* such a good thing, Sirius. How do we know we can trust this girl? She is a Carrows, after all. What if this is all some sort of trap to get to Harry?" he whispered, concern evident in his eyes. His protective instincts of Harry were coming on full-force.

Sirius grin faded at his friend's words. His fears were well-founded and understandable, but Sirius felt the need to assure him with his own views.

"I know this whole situation looks suspicious, Remus, and believe me, I too had my doubts about the girl, but Dumbledore has spoken to her personally and sees no danger. From the sound of it, the girl's been through hell, and she's lucky to be alive. If Dumbledore trusts her, I trust her. His judgment on such matters is rarely wrong, is it not? And you and I both know that Harry is no fool," Sirius finished assuredly.

Lupin thought for a moment and then conceded, knowing Sirius' reasoning was correct. "I suppose you're right..." he said finally, though still a little uncertain.

"Course I'm right," Sirius grinned, earning him a withering look from Lupin. Before Lupin had a chance to tell him off, however, Dumbledore suddenly appeared with McGonagall at his side.

Everyone immediately quieted at the appearance of their leader and nodded their heads in greeting. McGonagall took her seat while Dumbledore chose to remain standing near the head of the table where everyone could see and hear him clearly.

"Greetings, to all of you, please forgive my late arrival. Let us get right to business, shall we?" He spoke quietly and calmly, and everyone murmured his or her agreement.

"As you all know, the daughter of Alecto and Andromeda Carrows was discovered in the Forbidden Forest near Hogwarts yesterday. As we all were unaware of her existence prior to this, it no doubt came as quite a shock to us all. I have informed all of you of what she has told me of herself and her parents, and while the circumstances under which she came to escape are rather grim, it gives us one very valuable piece of information: that not only are the Carrows alive, but also that they are most likely anxious to retrieve young Ana and finish what they had started," he said.

"Like hell they will," Moody growled, banging a fist on the table. This garnered a round of similar angry responses, and Dumbledore had to raise his hands to get the room quiet again.

"I know all of you are eager to see the Carrows put to justice. They have eluded us for quite some time now and were responsible for the deaths of some dear friends and previous members of the original Order itself. This new development could, however, put things in our favor and eventually lead to their capture if we all work together," Dumbledore said as he looked around at all of them.

"Just tell us what needs to be done, Albus," Arthur Weasley said firmly, his kind face fixed on the Headmaster's.

"Well, Arthur, all I ask of you is to keep a sharp eye at the Ministry. Report to me if there are any unusual or out of the ordinary incidences reported, be it sightings, attacks, rumors...anything," Dumbledore replied to the red-haired man, who nodded his acquiescence. "Kingsley, Tonks, Dedalus, Remus" he continued, nodding to each in turn. "Perhaps combing the Forest and looking for any sign of them would be wise. Also, try to find the abandoned cabin if you can. It's a long shot, but there is a slight chance they are still residing there for the time being." The four nodded as well, only too happy to be of some help.

"And what of the girl, Albus?" Elphias Doge wheezed in his scratchy voice.

"The girl will be quite safe at Hogwarts. I've arranged for her to become a student, and I am confident she will blend in nicely," the Headmaster said with certainty.

Lupin couldn't resist voicing his concerns about the girl aloud. "Is she trustworthy? How do we know she isn't deceiving us?" he asked, earning him a scowl from Sirius. Lupin needed to hear it in Dumbledore's own words, however, and so he ignored this.

Dumbledore gave a small smile at this. "I do believe Ms. Brighton is incapable of such dishonesty. After hearing about her ordeal firsthand there is no doubt in my mind that she is true. Our worries should not lie in her," he assured. Lupin, along with everyone else, seemed to accept this and nodded.

"Perhaps we can use the girl to our advantage," Elphias rasped, looking around.

“You mean as bait?” Sirius asked incredulously.

“I don’t see why not,” the wizened, old man replied, affronted. “If it’s her they’re coming after, we could get this over with quickly and easily by luring them out of hiding, which they would most certainly do if the situation was tempting enough. She needn’t get hurt if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Oh, well, thank Merlin for that,” Sirius said sarcastically, feeling his anger rise slightly.

“Now see here—“ Elphias blustered, meeting Sirius’ challenging glare with one of his own.

“She’s an innocent girl, Doge!” Sirius interrupted harshly. “You’ve heard the story. Hasn’t she been through enough?” he barked.

Hagrid had remained silent up until this point but jumped in quickly at this. “E’s right! You can’t make the poor thing do somethin’ like that! It’s wrong, that is,” he nearly bellowed from his seat.

Before the red-faced Doge could respond, however, Dumbledore quickly intervened.

“All of you, please!” he beseeched. When he was certain they would remain silent, he continued. “Elphias, while it is a good plan in theory, and I’m sure you mean well, I am afraid Sirius and Hagrid are right. It would be far too dangerous, and I cannot ask that of her. I also think it would be best if we didn’t rush into things. Let us see what we can find out first and go from there,” he said calmly.

Everyone seemed to be in agreement with this reasoning, and even Doge seemed all right with it, though he did look a little sullen still.

“Good,” Dumbledore nodded. “Now if there’s nothing else, I believe we should all get some rest. Remember, do what you can and contact me if anything is discovered. We will find them, my friends.”

And with that, the meeting adjourned, and everyone began leaving, either by apparating or through the Floo Network. Sirius rose and went to catch Dumbledore before he could leave.

“Albus, I think you’ve forgotten something. What can I do to help?” he asked the wizard quietly.

Dumbledore turned gentle eyes on him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You are already helping immensely, Sirius. The lending of this place and Harry’s lessons are all I could ask of you.”

Sirius felt his temper rise a bit. “I meant the Carrows, Albus. Surely there’s something—“

“My friend, you know that isn’t possible. There is still a search out for you, and I am already putting you at great risk by allowing you to come to Hogwarts to teach Harry. I refuse to place you in more danger than you already are. We need you, Sirius. Know that.” And with that, Dumbledore was gone, leaving behind a very flustered Sirius.

“He’s right, you know,” Lupin said after a moment of silence. It was just the two of them now, though Sirius had been too deep in thought to notice that everyone had left.

Sirius said nothing and gave Lupin a hard glance. He felt helpless, and the familiar anger and resentment over his situation began to once again rise in him as it always did when he was reminded of it.

Instead of responding, he merely trudged up the stairs, intent on getting some sleep, even though it probably wouldn’t come. He was sick of feeling sorry for himself, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. Deep down he knew Dumbledore was right, but it didn’t make it any easier.

He’d do what he could. He’d teach Harry to the best of his ability, he’d assist the Order in any way possible, and he’d hope against hope that the Carrows were caught and put to justice. It would be a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

It was thoughts such as these that kept him going. Thoughts such as these that provided an escape from his personal hell.

They should be glad I’m not out there looking for them, he thought as he lay in bed. *Very glad...*

When sleep finally came, it brought with it dreams of vengeance and triumph. Revenge and freedom.

...Yes, and freedom. Freedom....freedom...freedom.

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AN: Another chapter for y'all. Sorry for the wait. If you like it let me know! Thanks again...

Chapter 7

Sunlight poured through the Gryffindor boys' dormitory window, its rays finding themselves spilled like liquid gold across Harry's sleeping form. Slowly he awoke, stretching languorously as he did so, a smile growing on his face as his thoughts automatically turned to Ana. He lay there peacefully for a moment, reveling in the quietness of the dorm room, the distant chirping of birds outside, the muted ringing of the clock tower striking twelve...

Wait...twelve! *Oh no...*

Harry bolted from bed like lightening, grabbing his glasses from the side table to look at the small clock next to his bed. He paled as he verified that it was indeed 12:00. He was supposed to be with Sirius for another lesson right now. How could he have allowed himself to be so careless as to sleep in?

He inwardly berated himself for laying awake late into the night, lost in thoughts about the previous two days and a certain grey-eyed girl. He was paying for it now as he rushed to find some clothes to put on, stumbling a bit in his hurry.

He finally grabbed some items and dressed quicker than he ever had before, running at full speed towards the empty practice room where Sirius was waiting and no doubt wondering where his student was. He felt a brief tinge of regret and guilt as he realized he wouldn't have time to see Ana before his lesson, and he hoped she wouldn't be too upset when he didn't show up like he had yesterday. He'd just have to see her afterwards, he supposed. There was no helping it.

These thoughts tore through his mind in quick succession as he rounded a corner at full-speed, but they were soon replaced by worry over what Sirius would say to his being late once again. He only hoped that this would somehow detract his godfather's attention away from teasing Harry about Ana again.

Gosh that was embarrassing...

But as Harry burst into the room panting and doubled-over with his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath, he glanced up to see Sirius casually lounging against the wall with arms crossed and a mischievous grin on his handsome face, and he somehow doubted very much that he would get a reprieve today.

Here we go again....

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Ana, too, awoke late, though for a slightly different reason than Harry's. Madame Pomfrey had given her a sleeping draught last night so that she may have a better rest and give her wounds more time to heal. Ana stretched and realized it must have worked because she was feeling much better than she had been. The soreness and pain were gone.

She rose, looked over at the clock and frowned slightly. No Harry. Had he come while she was sleeping? That must be it, she decided. He probably didn't want to wake her. But then why wasn't he still here?

Then it hit her. *His lesson! Of course! I forgot...*

This thought made her feel a little better, though she couldn't help feeling a bit selfish for wanting him to be here. She knew that his lessons were far more important than her, and so she forced herself to wash Harry out of her thoughts. At least for now.

She looked around the room, studying it for what felt like the billionth time and sighed. She was bored. Before she had gone to sleep last night she had begun reading one of the books Harry had brought her (she had already read the other two before, she discovered), but for some reason reading was the last thing she wanted to do right now.

What she *really* wanted to do was get out of this room, if only for a little while. Being stuck in bed was really a very horrible thing when one got right down to it, and she felt herself itching to get up and walk around a bit.

As soon as the thought stuck her, she couldn't get it out of her mind. She chewed on her thumbnail in thought. It wouldn't hurt to just explore a little bit, would it? She looked towards Pomfrey's office but heard nothing. *Maybe she isn't there*, she thought with hope. She knew if she were caught, the nurse would have a fit and fuss over her even more, but at the moment Ana was willing to take the risk.

Hesitantly she rose from her bed, careful not to make a sound in case Pomfrey was listening. She looked down and was reminded of the fact that she was still wearing the hospital gown she had been given and wondered briefly what to do. She couldn't go around Hogwarts wearing it that was for sure.

But then she remembered that Pomfrey had told her that she had cleaned and pressed the clothes she had come with, which included a worn, simple, knee-length shirt dress, a faded light grey in color, and her shabby black coat. Ana looked around, wondering what Pomfrey had done with them and not seeing any sign of them anywhere. With disappointment she realized they must be in the nurse's office.

She crept towards it cautiously, hoping against hope that she wasn't in for some reason or another. She reached the open door and peeked her head in, breathing a sigh of relief when the woman was nowhere to be found. A smile sprung to her face as she saw her clothes neatly folded on a chair, and she grabbed them, or the dress rather, leaving the coat behind.

She walked out into the hospital room once again and made her way to the lavatory, closing the door behind her. She glanced at the mirror and frowned. She looked a fright. Her hair was a wild mess and she still looked rather pale and gaunt, though it was a definite improvement from yesterday. She splashed cool water on her face and did what she could to make herself look semi-presentable by combing her hair, but giving up after a while. She changed into the dress, then, smoothing it out, comfortable in its familiar feel. It was a small improvement, but an improvement nonetheless.

When she was done, she stepped back into the hospital room feeling refreshed. She stopped for a moment, listening. When she thought it

was safe and clear, she exited the room into the vast hallway beyond, relishing in her freedom and new surroundings.

Ana walked slowly, trying to take everything in. The corridor was vast and empty, with numerous doors and side corridors appearing every so often. She'd always known Hogwarts was a large place, but she never expected *this*. She was afraid she'd get lost and this was only one floor! But she pushed her fears aside and walked on, stopping now and then to look at some of the paintings.

The people inside them either ignored her completely or threw her curious glances, as if they wondered what a strange girl was doing wandering the hallways when term hadn't even begun yet. She also passed by several impressive looking suits of armor (one of which saluted her for some strange reason).

Soon she came upon a room with no door. Curious, she walked inside to discover numerous glass cases filled with plaques and trophies of all shapes and sizes, polished so brightly she could see her reflection in each one. She studied them interestedly, reading the various names and awards, which included things like Services to the School, Medals for Magical Merit, House Cups, Quidditch Cups and Awards, among other things.

She stood in front of the case dedicated to awards for Quidditch, glancing briefly over the plaques with names of students long gone from the halls of Hogwarts, but caught her breath and did a double-take when she spotted a name she was familiar with.

James Potter. Gryffindor Chaser, 1972.

"Harry's dad," she breathed softly, studying the name intently. It had to be him, she realized. *So he played Quidditch too...*

A sadness filled her at the sight. She wondered briefly how many times Harry had come to this room to look at the shining shield displaying his father's name so proudly. *It must mean a lot to him...*

Her mind wandered, and she caught herself wondering what Harry's dad was like all those years ago. Was he like Harry? Did they have the same smile? The same unruly black hair? Was he kind?

Before she could ponder it more, however, her thoughts were abruptly interrupted by an evil cackling that seemed to echo off the walls, and she turned terrified just in time to see the strangest looking little man she'd ever seen come floating through one of the walls.

He was wearing very loud, bright clothing (which included a garish orange bow tie) and was cackling like a crazy person as he bounced around the room. Ana stared open-mouthed, at a complete loss as to what she should do. The thought of getting the hell out of there came to her suddenly, but before she could even take a step, the little man began talking.

"Hah! You should have seen her face! HAHAHA! Oh, what fun!" he roared in laughter, bouncing off the walls gleefully.

Ana was jolted from her shock when she realized he was speaking to her. "W-whose face?" she asked unsurely, not really knowing what else she could say.

"Whose face! Why ickle Moany Myrtle's, of course! She was furious when old Peeves here interrupted her daily lamentations, but when I threw all those books at her...Hoo-boy, that's when the fun *really* started! Hah ha!" A new wave of cackles overtook him at this, and the sound was nearly deafening.

"Well, that wasn't very nice of you," Ana said, frowning slightly at who she now knew was Peeves.

She had read in *Hogwarts: A History* that there were many resident ghosts who called the school their home, and Peeves was one of the more mischievous ones. Or poltergeist, rather, since she noticed his solid-looking exterior, paired with the fact that he could manipulate objects such as books. *Myrtle must be a ghost*, Ana thought.

At this reproach, Peeves stopped laughing and halted in mid-air, turning to study Ana for the first time since he'd barged into the room. A deep frown appeared on his impish face, and a suspicious look came to his eyes that made Ana suddenly feel very nervous. Perhaps she should have kept her mouth shut.

“Who’re you? There’s not supposed to be any kiddies here now...I’ve never terrorized you before,” he sneered accusingly, the suspicious look in his dark eyes ever growing. “What’s your name?” he asked, peering at her as he floated closer.

Ana gulped, backing up slowly until she hit the trophy case, which rattled slightly from the impact. Here it goes, the first test of her new identity. She wondered if she could pull it off convincingly, knowing it would be even more difficult with Peeves’ mistrustful gaze on her.

“Ana. A-Ana Brighton,” she stuttered slightly, trying her hardest not to break eye contact with him even though she desperately wanted to.

Peeves looked at her for a second, and then, so suddenly it made Ana jump, he screamed, “LIAR! You lie to old Peevsey, you do! I know it! LIAR LIAR PANTS ON FIRE!” He zipped around the room repeating this at the top of his lungs in a sing-song tone of voice, doing the occasional flip and pointing an accusing finger at the stricken Ana.

She paled, her mouth going dry as she wondered what to do. If he didn’t stop that bellowing soon, everyone in the entire building would come running in to see what all the noise was about, including Madame Pomfrey. She tried shushing him, begging him to be quiet, but Peeves was having none of it. Ana was just about to make a run for it when an angry shriek was heard, and another figure came tearing through the wall.

She was a ghost with dark hair and glasses, wearing what looked to Ana like a school uniform, and currently had a look of unbridled fury adorning her young face.

Myrtle.

At her appearance, Peeves suddenly stopped his howling, forgetting about Ana for the moment.

“You. Are. Done. For.” Myrtle seethed, her fists clenched as she gave the offending poltergeist a glare of hatred.

Peeves seemed untroubled by this statement, however, and turned to face the girl ghost of Hogwarts challengingly. "Oh yeah? What are you going to do about it ickle Myrtle-kins?" With this said, Peeves stuck out his tongue and made a rather rude noise in her direction.

Ana didn't stay long enough to find out, however, and took the opportunity for Peeves' distraction to slip out of the room and continued on quickly down the hallway, though she did hear Myrtle say something about someone called 'The Bloody Baron,' whoever that was. Ana didn't much care at the moment; she just wanted to get as far away from that horrible devil as she could.

Well, that went well, she thought ruefully. Maybe she should practice with her new name, or something, before school starts. It wouldn't do for everyone to be able to tell so easily that she was hiding something. Course, she had a feeling that their reactions would be slightly different from Peeves' screaming that she was a liar. At least, she hoped so, that is...

Oh gods, what if they do find out? This sudden and horrifying thought brought with it all sorts of worst-case scenarios that went rushing through her mind, each one more terrifying than the last. The doubts ate away at her as she ambled onward, too deep in thought to really pay attention to where she was going.

She was used to fear. It had been a part of her life ever since she could remember...but this was different. Never before had she had to worry about what others would think of her. She had never needed to. But now, with school only less than a week away, the worry and apprehension filled her entire being. *Maybe this isn't such a good idea...What if I'm in over my head,* she thought with a heavy heart.

Thoroughly downtrodden, Ana stopped and decided to make her way back to the hospital wing before she ran into anyone else. *It was a stupid idea anyway,* she thought morosely as she turned around, but stopped short when she looked at her surroundings. She must have turned somewhere along the way without realizing it. There were side corridors on all sides...but which one had she come through?

She tried backtracking, going down one corridor a few steps only to turn around and try another one. A sinking feeling grew in her

stomach as she realized that absolutely none of it looked the least bit familiar. *Great, just what I needed...I'm lost*, she thought despairingly, looking around and willing herself to remember something, anything, that would help her get her bearings.

She tried another corridor only to find that it led to some steps leading downward and was about to turn around when she heard something.

It sounded like...a battle? *That can't be right...* But sure enough, as she walked closer, the sounds of clangs, grunts, and shuffling feet echoed up the staircase to her ears. More than a little curious, she slowly made her way down the steps to find herself in yet another corridor. The sounds were coming from her left, so she tiptoed forward until she saw a door slightly ajar. The sounds were much clearer now, and she could distinguish two male voices, one of which sounded very much like...

"Harry?" she whispered to herself, confused. Alarmed, she nudged the door open to behold a shocking sight.

Harry and an older, dark-haired man were currently in the middle of what appeared to be a very intense swordfight. They danced around each other, their swords clanging, sweating and so intensely focused that neither of them noticed Ana, who continued to stare from her place in the doorway.

She was frozen in place, unable to make a sound as she watched Harry's movements, completely mesmerized. He was so...graceful. It was the only way to describe his actions as he parried and nimbly twisted away from the man's blade, making it look like the easiest thing in the entire world. He looked powerful. Majestic. It was as if she were looking at a completely different person than the boy who had had her smiling and laughing her whole time here thus far. This Harry wasn't a boy...this Harry was a man. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't take her eyes off him.

Harry's arms and legs ached from the strain on his muscles as he blocked blow after blow of Sirius' sword. But as much as his body screamed in protest with each thrust and turn, Harry went on even harder, knowing that this was the best he had ever fought in his life. And maybe, just maybe, he'd be able to beat Sirius this time. This

thought propelled him onward as he blocked a particularly vicious blow from his godfather's blade, immediately coming back with one of his own.

Sirius managed to block it, though only just barely. "Good, Harry!" he cried, blocking more of his godson's thrusts with a smile. He'd never been more proud of him.

Harry summoned what was left of his strength and came at Sirius for all he was worth. Their swords clashed, and in a moment that almost seemed to be suspended in time, Harry managed to disarm his godfather with a powerful blow, his sword automatically moving to lightly touch the older man's chest. Before Harry could revel in his triumph, however, he was shocked when he immediately found himself face to face with Sirius's wand.

"You cheated," Harry said in disbelief, panting and trying to catch his breath.

Sirius merely gave him a grin. "Rule number one, Harry," he said simply, gazing meaningfully at the young man before him.

Harry grimaced and lowered his sword, conceding defeat. "Never underestimate the enemy," he said mechanically, chastising himself inwardly for his folly. He had been so close, too...

Sirius lowered his wand, offering Harry his hand to shake, which he did, though a little begrudgingly. "You fought wonderfully today, Harry. Don't be discouraged. In a fair fight you would have beaten me, but you must remember that the people you will be fighting will *never* be fair. If the opportunity arises, you must disarm them immediately," Sirius said consolingly.

Harry grinned evilly at this and discreetly pulled out his wand. "What, you mean like this? *Expelliarmus!*"

Sirius' wand flew out of his hand, and the man stood slightly dumbstruck for a moment at the unexpected move, and Harry started laughing triumphantly. Sirius got over it quick, however, and with a grin he lunged at his godson, and they both fell to the floor, laughing as each one tried to shove and tackle the other.

“Now who’s the cheater!” Sirius cried as he tried to push Harry off him to get the advantage.

Harry just laughed and said, “Never underestimate the enemy, Sirius.”

They rolled around like fools on the floor until they heard someone clearing their throat by the door. They froze in mid-tackle and looked towards the sound to see Ana standing in the doorway, arms crossed and with a very amused look on her face.

Startled by her sudden presence, Harry shot up from the floor quickly, looking completely disheveled. His hair stuck out at odd angles, his clothes clung to his sweaty form, and dirt covered them from his scuffle on the floor with Sirius. Sirius rose as well and couldn’t help mumbling so only Harry could hear, “Geez, if only you moved that fast in practice.”

Harry shot him a slight glare and turned his attention back to Ana, moving towards her with great strides. “Ana...what...what are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in bed. Are you okay?” he asked, glancing over her form worriedly, curiously noting her change in clothing.

“I’m fine, Harry. I just couldn’t stand being stuck in that room anymore. If I stayed there any longer I was going to go mad. I just decided to take a look around, is all, but I got sort of lost, you see, and I heard you fighting so I came to see what was going on,” she explained, shooting a curious glance at Sirius who hung back, swiping at his clothes to get the dust off.

“Listen, I’m really sorry I didn’t come see you this morning. I woke up late and had to run here just to make it in time for my lesson. I would have come, really—“

“Harry, it’s okay,” she interrupted him, laughing slightly. “To tell you the truth I didn’t even know you didn’t come. I woke up late too...”

Harry’s troubled look turned into a grin at this. “Oh good,” he said, relieved. He was about to say something more when he noticed Ana’s glance was not on him. He turned to see Sirius standing where

he had left him, idly trying to look like he wasn't listening to their conversation.

"Oh, Ana, this is Sirius," Harry said, and with this Sirius walked up to them both and offered Ana his hand, which she shook with a shy smile. "He's my godfather," he explained.

"Your godfather?" Ana asked, shocked. Harry nodded, smiling.

"Oh...it's...it's nice to meet you, sir," she said falteringly.

Sirius smiled warmly. "Call me Sirius. And it's very nice to meet you as well, Ana. Harry's told me all about you," he said, directing a grin at Harry, who shot him a murderous glance in return.

Ana blushed, not knowing what to think of this revelation. What exactly did he mean by that? Did he know who she *really* was?

Sirius saw her apparent discomfort and attempted to set her at ease. "It's all right, Ana. I know about your parents, and trust me, I won't tell a soul. Your secret is safe, rest assured. I was very sorry to hear about what has happened to you. All I can say now is that I am very glad you are here," he told her sincerely.

So he did know. She wasn't sure how to respond, so she just murmured a quiet thanks.

"You're safe here, Ana," he assured her, sensing her fear returning at the reminder of her parents. "Trust me, you couldn't be in more capable hands than with ole Harry here. He'll watch over you," he said, throwing an arm around his godson with a smile.

Harry's cheeks reddened a little, and Ana smiled, feeling more comfortable as she watched the affectionate interaction between the two of them. Sirius ruffled Harry's hair teasingly, and Harry shoved his arm away, causing Sirius to laugh again. It was cute.

"Well, Harry, you and Ana should get going. I'm sure she's eager to see the rest of the castle," Sirius said, and Harry looked to Ana for affirmation of this, getting it when she nodded enthusiastically.

"I'd love that. But only if you want to, Harry," she added quickly. "I'd be happy with just you showing me the way back to the hospital wing, to tell you the truth, because I don't think I'll ever find it again." She said it with such seriousness that it made Harry laugh and Sirius grin.

"Of course I want to show you around. It's no trouble at all," he said with a smile.

Sirius leaned in towards her confidingly. "Don't worry. I got lost once, too, when I was your age. But you get the hang of it pretty quickly. Pretty soon you'll know every nook and cranny of this old place," he smiled.

"That's a relief. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found you guys," she laughed slightly, feeling better.

"Come on, let's go," Harry said, moving toward her. "Bye, Sirius!" he called behind him to his godfather.

"It was nice meeting you," Ana waved, looking behind her as she was shoved gently out the door by Harry.

"Goodbye you two. Try to stay out of trouble, will you?"

"We won't," Harry assured him with an impish grin, waving to him. Sirius couldn't help chuckling and shook his head as he disappeared back into the room.

Harry and Ana walked side by side down the corridor, Ana taking Harry's lead as he led her toward some more stairs. "I hope you don't mind if I take a shower first," he said. "You'll get to see Gryffindor's common room. That's what House I'm in," he explained.

"Oh no, I don't mind at all. I'd love to see what it looks like," she smiled at him. "So, sword fighting lessons, huh?" she asked, changing the subject. When Harry had told her he was taking private lessons, that was the *last* thing she thought it would be for. She was curious as to why he needed them, but didn't want to ask that outright.

Harry grinned, tugging at his ear. "Yeah, Sirius has been teaching me for half the summer almost. Every day," he sighed.

She smiled. "He cares for you a great deal."

Harry turned to look at her and looked back at the floor, a smile tugging at his lips. "Yeah, he's pretty great. I'm lucky to have him. Even *if* he is a pain in the arse sometimes," he laughed. "He's in the Order, by the way. That's how he knows about your parents."

"The Order?" she asked, confused.

"They're the group that Dumbledore heads that's trying to stop Voldemort and his Death Eaters. They all know about you now, of course. They'll do everything they can to catch your parents, trust me," he told her firmly.

"Oh," she said, nodding. Knowing that there was a whole group of powerful wizards fighting against evil like her parents set her mind at ease a little. She had faith in Dumbledore. If anyone could put her parents to justice, it would be him.

"Oh, and by the way, don't tell anyone about Sirius," Harry said to her quietly as they continued on. "He's supposed to be in hiding, so no one can find out that he comes here to teach me."

"Why is he in hiding?" Ana asked, surprised.

Harry frowned, looking a little angry as he thought about it. "He was sent to Azkaban for twelve years for committing a crime he didn't do, and he escaped three years ago."

"That's horrible!" she gasped. "What was the crime?"

Harry told her that his godfather had been accused of killing a group of muggles, along with a wizard named Peter Pettigrew. He'd also been blamed for betraying Harry's parents, thus leading to their death, but it was really Pettigrew who was the guilty one. Harry then went on to tell her about his third year at Hogwarts and how he had thought Sirius wanted to kill him. It wasn't until Sirius exposed Pettigrew in front of him, proving that he was still alive, that Harry finally believed him.

“And ever since we helped him escape, he’s been in hiding. Everyone still believes him to be guilty, except Dumbledore, and the rest of the Order, of course. Now he’s been coming to school in secret so he can teach me. I need to be prepared...” he trailed off, looking deep in thought.

Ana was stunned. She had read about Azkaban and knew what a horrible place it was. Twelve years was a long time. It’s a wonder he survived. That was the place where her parents should be right now...where all Dark wizards should be. This train of thought was lost, however, as Harry’s last words came back to echo in her mind. *‘I need to be prepared’...*

“Prepared? For what?” she asked hesitantly.

Harry turned and looked her full in the face, slowing his walk until they both stopped. “For Voldemort,” he said vehemently.

The cold determination that flashed in his eyes scared her. For a moment there he reminded her of... She swallowed and lowered her eyes, letting it drop and pushing the unsettling thought out of her mind, for as quickly as it had come, the look was gone from Harry’s eyes, and their green depths were recognizable once again.

They stood there in silence for a moment, but before either of them could say a word, an unmistakable evil cackling came echoing down the hall that made Ana’s head shoot up in alarm. She paled, and a cold dread filled her entire being.

Oh no...

“Oh gods,” she whispered, looking in the direction of the sound. She turned towards Harry, frantic. “Hide me!” she pleaded, grabbing his arms and looking around for a suitable place.

“What? Why?” Harry asked confused.

“Please, Harry, just...*please!*” she begged urgently. The last thing she wanted to do right now was to be hounded once again by Peeves.

Harry saw the worried look in her eyes and immediately jumped into action, not really needing a better reason at the moment. He grabbed her by the hand, making a mad dash for a small alcove containing a tall statue. He pushed them both behind it until they were hidden from view, with Ana pushed against the wall and Harry shielding her body with his own, his hands on either side of her. It was a tight fit, but neither noticed right away how very close they were, each one too preoccupied with listening for Peeves and keeping as quiet as humanly possible.

Ana held her breath as she heard the troublesome poltergeist slowly approach singing a song he seemed to have made up and rather horribly too. They heard him as he was about to pass their hiding space, both tensing when they heard him approach the very statue they were hiding behind.

Fearing the worst, Ana closed her eyes and said a silent prayer, but the only sound that was heard was a faint *scratching*, immediately followed once again by his song. She breathed a sigh of relief as she heard him make his way onward down the hallway, now and then halting to do Merlin knew what.

It was only then that Ana became acutely aware of her proximity to Harry. She stilled, afraid to move an inch, because if she did, Harry's chest would be pressed against her own. Her heart raced a little at the thought, and she felt her cheeks start to burn.

Harry felt Ana's soft breath on his cheek, and something stirred from deep within him as he looked down at her. He had wanted to kiss her once before, but this was more than a want. This was a need. He'd never had feelings like this before, and the suddenness of it all scared him a little.

"I...I think he's gone now," she whispered, breaking the tense silence and casting her eyes downward. She was afraid he'd see the red on her cheeks and know that she was reacting to the nearness of him.

Harry broke from his trance and lowered his arms. *What was I thinking? I almost kissed her! Snap out of it, Potter...*

They exited the tiny space, an awkward silence passing between them. Harry moved his arm to run a hand through his hair, but stopped in mid-motion as he caught sight of the front of the statue.

“Why am I not surprised,” he said with a reluctant grin. He had to admit, Peeves was pretty crafty when it came to mischief and the general disruption of things.

Ana turned to see what Harry was talking about, her eyes widening a little as she did. “Oh, that’s just horrible...” she trailed off, her eyes fixed on the face of the statue, which now sported a comical mustache and goatee drawn in a black ink, thus defaming the regal looking face of the woman.

Harry chuckled and then turned his attention back to Ana. “So, you wanna tell me why you’re trying to avoid Peeves? I mean, not that I blame you...he is pretty awful,” he laughed.

Ana gave a small laugh too, realizing she may have overreacted a little bit. “Um, well when I was wandering around I found the Trophy Room, and I was just looking around in there when he sort of...floated in. He was going on about something horrible he did to Myrtle, and I sort of...reproached him for it.”

“Ooh,” Harry winced. “Bad idea.”

“Tell me about it,” she sighed. “Then he said he didn’t recognize me and asked me who I was, and of course I totally botched that because he immediately started screaming that I was a liar. He was yelling it at the top of his lungs and wouldn’t stop!” she started pacing in front of him, wringing her hands as she did so.

“Oh no...” he said, but once again, wasn’t really surprised. It was a very Peeves thing to do.

“Luckily Myrtle came in, and they started fighting enough not to notice me when I slipped out,” she said, still pacing, only now chewing on a thumbnail.

Harry reached out to still her, pulling her hand away from her mouth with a small smile. She looked up at him surprised. “Listen,” he said.

“Don’t pay any attention to Peeves, okay? He’s just a troublemaker. It’s his job to do stuff like that,” he consoled, looking into her eyes.

This did nothing to mollify Ana, however. “Yes, but what if he finds out? What if he tells everyone who I really am? What if—“

“Ana,” Harry interrupted her, quiet laughter escaping his throat at the sight of her. She looked terrified. “He won’t find out, and he’s not going to be telling anyone about anything, okay? Trust me, he’s already forgotten you exist. He has too many other things to worry about, as you can clearly see,” he glanced again at the statue, then back at Ana with a grin.

She lowered her eyes, frowning, and Harry’s smile slowly faded at the sight. Instinctually, he knew that something else was bothering her that went far deeper than her worries about Peeves. A silence fell before she spoke quietly.

“Everyone’s going to hate me, aren’t they.” It wasn’t a question.

Harry felt a pang in his heart as he looked down at her bent head. “Ana—“

She lifted her head to face him, tears threatening to spill, but she wouldn’t allow them to. “I’m not a good liar, Harry. Peeves found me out before I’d even spoken ten words! Everyone else will too...” she trailed off, turning her head away from him. She knew that looking into his eyes right now would be her undoing, and the tears would almost certainly fall. She was so sick of crying.

“Bad things happen when I try to lie,” she whispered, instantly reminded of how she had tried to save Mr. Brighton and failed with her attempts at lying.

Harry clenched his jaw and took her by the arms. “Ana, look at me,” he ordered, but she didn’t comply. “Look at me, Ana.” She steeled herself and turned to meet his eyes reluctantly, taking a deep breath.

“You’re not lying about anything, Ana. This is you now. *This* is your new life. And so what if people find out? You didn’t do anything wrong, Ana. They’d have to be daft not to like you, anyways. You’re a good

person. You're not like *them*. That's the only thing that matters." He spoke with a quiet certainty that instantly quelled some of her fears. She looked up at him, marveling in how easy he made it all seem. She felt like she could take on the world at that moment. She'd fail of course...but she would sure as hell try.

She gave him a small smile, thanking him with her eyes. It was the only response she could give at the moment. She didn't trust her voice enough to use it quite yet.

Harry smiled, too, and grabbed her hand. "Come on, let's go. No more talking about school. We'll worry about that when the time comes, all right? For now let's enjoy what's left of the summer. Lots of things to see today," he said, walking quickly with her trailing behind, their hands still connected.

We. He said we.

A warm feeling enveloped her and she smiled secretly at his choice of words. She wasn't alone. Not anymore.

"Slow down!" she laughed, running to keep up with him. The sound of their laughter echoed down the halls of Hogwarts, and were there anyone around to hear it, they would have smiled and laughed too, so infectious and happy was the sound.

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AN: Hello all! Another chapter for you! Sorry there's not a lot going on in it. It was needed, though, so I guess that's all right, right? The plot's moving along slowly but surely. Anyways, thanks again to everyone who's reviewed so far! I really appreciate them, so if you want to leave one for me, it would make me happy :) Oh, and I thought I should mention that school for me has started (blech!) so updates might come a little slower. But maybe not. I dunno, we'll see. Anyways, thanks again and have a nice day!

Chapter 8

Ana looked around in wonder as she sat on one of the Gryffindor Common Room's squashy armchairs, waiting patiently for Harry to get done with his shower. The room was beautiful, what with its rich colors, wood furnishings, and large windows. It had a very homey appeal, and Ana felt welcome in it.

As she glanced around, her eyes drifted up the stairs towards where Harry had vanished a few minutes ago. The sudden image of Harry in the shower sprang to her mind, but it was pushed out just as quickly as she clamped her eyes shut, whipping her head back around to find something else to focus on. *What is the matter with you? Have you gone daft?*

She ran a hand over her eyes and sighed. She was starting to believe she was daft. Ever since she'd arrived here, strange thoughts and notions that she never would have even dreamed of thinking about before had found themselves lodged into her brain. Namely those concerning Harry.

Harry.

Just thinking his name caused her pulse to quicken slightly and an involuntary smile start to form on her face. What was it about him? Was it his smile, maybe? Or his gentleness towards her? How comfortable he made her feel? Or perhaps it was his kind, green eyes...

"Like what you see?"

She started at the sudden interruption to her thoughts and jumped up so quickly from the couch, one would have thought that it had burned her. She whirled around to see Harry standing on the stairs with a small smile on his face as he looked at her. His hair was still slightly damp, and he was dressed in clean clothes.

Ana stared at him in alarm for a moment. Had he known what she was thinking about?

“What?” she asked rattled.

Harry’s smile faltered a little as he slowly descended the steps. “The Common Room,” he explained, a little confused. “Do you like it?”

Relief flooded her entire being, and a breath of air whooshed out of her as she smiled. “Oh, yeah...yes, I mean. Yes I...I like it very much,” she said, clearing her throat.

Harry walked up to her, looking at her strangely for a moment, wondering if she was okay. She seemed to be fine, however, so he shrugged it off and smiled at her. He was feeling much more refreshed after his shower. He was always a mess after practice with Sirius. Even Quidditch wasn’t as bad.

“I could spend hours in here,” she said, smiling as she looked around the room once again. “It’s the perfect spot for a good read.”

Harry laughed. “Most of us do spend hours in here...though not for reading. At least not voluntary reading. We do a lot of studying in here,” he explained, and she laughed. “Unless it’s Hermione, of course. This is her favorite place to read.”

“Well I can see why. This is great,” she said, comfortable once again in Harry’s calming presence, which she thought was kind of funny, seeing as how he was the one who caused her to become so flustered in the first place. She was having a hard time getting used to all of these conflicting emotions. Was this normal?

“Well, you ready to go?” he asked her and smiled when she nodded enthusiastically. She followed him out of the portrait hole and into the hall. “We’re on the seventh floor right now,” he explained. “So we’ll work our way down. But first I want to show you the Owlery.”

“Owlery?” she asked, excited. Having nearly memorized *Hogwarts, A History*, Ana knew all about the various rooms of the castle, but reading a book wasn’t the same as seeing it for oneself. The Owlery was a room she had always been particularly interested in, for no matter how hard she tried to imagine it, the image was never quite right in her mind.

Harry led her toward the West Tower, and they climbed some stone steps into the room. Ana looked around in awe, the sight filling her eyes. It was a circular room with large open windows, the ceiling so high above her, she had to crane her neck all the way back just to see it. But the most magnificent part of this room, however, was the many owls nestled on perches that reached to the very top of the tower itself. There were quite a few empty perches as well, but Ana figured that must be because school had yet to begin.

Harry confirmed this by telling her that these owls belonged to the school, since not every student owned an owl for themselves. Then, quite suddenly, Harry made an odd sort of whistling sound and immediately, a large, snow-white owl flew down from a perch and landed on Harry's outstretched arm.

Harry was grinning largely as he gently petted the owl, who affectionately nipped his finger as he did so. "This is Hedwig," he said, turning to Ana.

Ana looked astonished. "You have an owl?" she said, unable to take her eyes off of Hedwig.

Harry nodded and also looked at Hedwig, who looked as though she were quite used to such attention. "Yeah, I've had her ever since I started here. Hagrid got her for me," he said, smiling at the memory.

"She's gorgeous," she said, admiring the beautiful creature. Hedwig's amber eyes looked around almost indifferently, but Ana noticed with a smile that the owl discreetly fluffed her feathers proudly at this.

Harry looked at her, grinning. "You want to pet her?" he asked.

"Oh, gosh, I don't know if—" Her hesitant response was cut off abruptly when Harry grabbed her hand and guided it gently over Hedwig's soft feathers. A smile beamed across her face as she pet the owl, Harry's hand releasing her own as she got the hang of it. He smiled at the joy on Ana's face and laughed a little when Hedwig made a satisfied hoot.

Ana laughed too. "She's so soft!"

Harry nodded smiling and lifted his arm a bit when Ana lowered her hand. "Alright, back you go," Harry told the owl with one last pet. Hedwig seemed reluctant, but flew back to her perch gracefully, obeying.

They left the room and slowly made their way down through the castle. Harry would point things out to her every now and then, telling her about various paintings or showing her where certain classrooms were located. He showed her the best shortcuts, which he said had saved him many a time from being late to class. She listened in rapt attention, trying to soak everything in. There was so much to see, it was a little overwhelming. Harry made it fun, however, telling her stories about his years at Hogwarts, like the time he'd been accosted by Moaning Myrtle in the prefect's bathroom, or when Fred and George had created their magical swamp by the statue of Gregory the Smarmy.

She laughed as she listened to him go on about his many adventures, trying to picture them in her mind. It all seemed too incredible to be real. It suddenly struck her how much she had missed out on over the years in hiding with her parents. But as she stared at the moving staircases, shouting portraits, and sunlit halls, she wasn't saddened by this fact. Instead, she felt excitement about the many things she could now look forward to.

When they reached the fourth floor, Harry happily showed Ana the library, knowing she'd be really excited about it. And excited she was. The library was huge, and she stared around in awe. Harry grinned as he stood near the entrance watching her explore. She looked like a kid in a candy store. Eventually Ana's oohing and ahing got them both kicked out by Madam Pince, who apparently didn't like disturbances in her library even when school was out.

Ana looked a little embarrassed as they walked down more stairs, but Harry just laughed, thinking it was pretty funny. It didn't take long for Ana, too, to crack a smile. After showing her the Great Hall (which Ana was highly impressed with), Harry was reminded of how hungry he was when his stomach suddenly growled quite loudly.

They both laughed. "You wanna get some food?" he asked her when his laughter subsided.

"Sounds great. I'm starving," she told him with a grin.

Harry nodded and told her to follow him, and they made their way down a flight of steps into the sub-levels of the castle, into a broad stone corridor that was brightly lit with torches. Ana looked around at the many paintings adorning the walls and noted with amused puzzlement that they all depicted food in some way. They stopped in front of a rather large painting of a bowl of fruit, and Ana watched astonished as Harry raised a hand to tickle the pear, which gave a giggle in response.

Harry just grinned at her. "I bet you didn't learn *that* in *Hogwarts, A History*, huh?"

"No, I sure didn't," she laughed and followed him into what she soon discovered were the kitchens. Pots and pans hung everywhere and four huge preparation tables took up most of the room. There were a few house-elves here and there, though not many. Ana figured most of them were probably occupied with something else, seeing as how school didn't begin for a few days yet.

Almost as soon as they walked in the door, a high-pitched voice came calling to them from across the room. "Sir Harry Potter! How lovely it is to see you today, sir. We was not expecting such a visit!"

The house-elf that had spoken had come running up to Harry, bowing so low to the ground as he said this that his nose almost connected with it.

"Dobby, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me sir? And stop that bowing, would you?" Harry admonished as he helped the house-elf straighten after almost toppling over. Dobby merely gave him a grateful smile and gazed at him admiringly. Ana shot Harry a questioning glance, and he responded by giving her a look that clearly said, '*don't ask.*'

“Dobby, I hope it wouldn’t be too much trouble to get some food, maybe? We’re starving,” Harry explained. “Oh, this is Ana, by the way,” he said, turning to her.

Ana smiled at Dobby and offered him her hand to shake. “It’s nice to meet you, Dobby.”

Dobby looked from her hand to Harry, then back to her hand again before finally grasping it heartily, shaking it up and down and smiling largely. “Dobby is pleased, miss. A friend of Harry Potter’s is a friend of Dobby’s,” he said enthusiastically, making Ana laugh a little.

Dobby then turned around and began addressing the other house-elves in an important voice. “Harry Potter and the young miss would likes something to eat. Let us make them something nice!”

And with that, the house-elves jumped into action, cooking up what was surely going to be much too much food for the both of them. Harry suddenly got an idea and turned to Ana with it. “Hey, do you want to bring the food outside and eat it? It’s a nice day, and you haven’t seen the grounds yet. We could eat it by the lake,” he said, looking to her for approval.

“That sounds great, Harry! I’d love to get outside for a little bit,” she smiled.

Harry asked Dobby if he could put the food into a basket for them, and the house-elf complied gladly, handing the food-filled basket over to him with yet another bow. Harry and Ana thanked them all and returned to the ground floor where they exited the castle through its large entrance doors.

The lawn swept out before them grandly, and a warm breeze blew across it, bringing with it the flowery fragrances of summer. The lake shimmered invitingly as they approached it, settling on a spot near its banks underneath a wide tree. Harry unpacked their food, and they both starting eating.

“So how do you like it so far?” Harry asked her with mouth full of chicken sandwich.

Ana laughed at this, and Harry swallowed, grinning sheepishly. She turned to look at the lake and everything surrounding her. "It's breathtaking...all of it," she said quietly as she looked back at the grand, towering castle, meaning it. It was the most beautiful place she'd ever seen. Course she hadn't seen very much in her years to compare it to, but she had a sneaking suspicion that even if she had spent her whole life traveling the world, no other place could be quite as dazzling.

Harry, too, gazed at the castle and smiled fondly at it. "I remember the first time I saw it. I swore I had to be dreaming," he laughed quietly. "But I knew it was real. It had to be. Even my dreams couldn't create something as magnificent as this," he paused and then continued softly. "It's become like a home to me. The only home I've ever known," he said with a sad smile.

Ana looked at Harry, her heart going out to him, and then turned her head back towards the castle. It was her home now, too, she realized. *Home*. The word seemed so foreign to her. She'd never considered any of the places she had stayed at with her parents "home." But as she studied the handsome, solid-looking castle before her, she realized that there was no other place she'd rather give the name to. Yes, this was her home now...and she couldn't be happier about it.

When they were done, they packed up the basket and walked across the grounds for a little bit, the comfortable silence that fell between them broken only by the occasional comment from Harry, who pointed out things like the Whomping Willow, Quidditch Pitch, and greenhouses.

The sun shone down on them both as they moved slowly forward, the sound of chirping birds filling their ears. Each one surreptitiously tried sneaking a look at the other periodically, and when their eyes met unexpectedly, they turned their heads away quickly, both of them thinking that they had been caught. To make matters even more embarrassing, at that moment their hands brushed against each other's accidentally, making them both blush, though Ana's cheeks were a little more red than Harry's.

Like a godsend, a loud voice saved them both from further acknowledging the awkward moment.

“ello there, ‘arry!”

Harry glanced over to where the voice had come from and smiled. “Hey, Hagrid,” he called, steadily making his way over to him and leaving Ana with no choice but to follow.

As they approached Hagrid (who seemed to be working in his pumpkin patch), Ana’s eyes widened at the sight of him. He was...*enormous*. It was quite an intimidating sight, and Ana would have been very frightened of him if she hadn’t known he was Harry’s friend.

He rose to meet them as they walked up (Ana trailing slightly behind Harry) and gave them a huge, beaming smile. “Well, blimey, look at yeh!” he said to Ana in astonishment as he recognized her. “It’s a bloody miracle! Yeh had us in a righ’ state, you know tha’?” Ana wasn’t quite sure how to respond to this, so she just smiled at him.

“Hagrid, this is Ana,” Harry said to the giant.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” she said shyly as his huge hand engulfed her own. “Thank you for the flowers, by the way. They were beautiful.”

Hagrid blushed, smiling. “Oh go on,” he said, waving his hand in dismissal and almost whacking Harry in the head with it in the process. “I was ‘appy to do it. Yeh deserved some cheerin’ up after all yeh’ve been through. It was the least I could do,” he told her bashfully.

“Well, thank you anyway. It was very kind of you,” she said smiling, liking Hagrid already.

“I’ve just been showing Ana around. Getting her acquainted and everything,” Harry told him, looking at Ana with a smile.

“Why, tha’s wonderful, ‘arry. And how d’yeh like it?” he asked her excitedly.

"I love it," she told him with a genuine smile. "There's no place else I'd rather be." She looked at Harry as she said this and knew it was the truth. Harry held her stare with a small smile for a moment before turning back to Hagrid.

"How's Rocky doing, Hagrid?" he asked, knowing he would appreciate his asking.

"Why, he's doin' great. I've jus' been to see him this mornin'. Seems he's found 'imself a nice tree for a home. I'm quite proud of him, I am," Hagrid said, staring wistfully towards the Forbidden Forest.

Ana followed his eyes and noticed the Forest for the first time as Hagrid rambled on about his new "pet." A cold feeling enveloped her as she stared at it unblinkingly, and soon Hagrid's voice seemed to fade into the background. A haze covered her mind, and she was suddenly somewhere else.

The trees...running...he's right behind me...I'll never make it...life or death...closing in...falling...life or death...falling...can't breath...life or—

"Ana!"

She started at the sudden urgency in the voice, and her surroundings slowly came back into focus. She was breathing hard and fast. Her heart pounded against her chest as if she had just run a mile. Her senses returned and she felt a hand grasping her arm, supporting her, which was good because her legs suddenly felt like they were made out of jelly for some reason. It took her a moment to tear her eyes away from the dark, unmoving trees to meet the worried gaze of Harry.

"Are you all right?" he asked her, a little frantic, though trying his best not to show how concerned he was. He'd called her name three times before she had even acknowledged that she had heard him.

Ana stared at him, confused. Her brain still felt a little fuzzy. "Um...yeah. Yeah, I'm...I'm fine. Sorry," she told him with a forced smile, shooting a glance at the Forest once again before averting her eyes to stare at the ground near her feet.

Harry stared at her hard, not really buying it but unsure how to find out what was really wrong. Hagrid, too, looked a little concerned, and he invited them both inside his hut for some tea, thinking maybe it would make her feel a little better. She nodded mutely and let Harry lead her into the hut where she had unknowingly spent her first moments at Hogwarts. Hagrid poured the tea and immediately went into one of his stories, which dispelled much of the tenseness that had followed them in from the moment outside.

Ana listened quietly to Hagrid's deep voice and drank her tea slowly, feeling better as she did so. She pushed the disturbing memories to the back of her mind and soon forgot them as she listened to Hagrid's tales, laughing softly when he said something funny every now and then.

Harry, however, did not forget it so easily. He only half-listened to Hagrid and opted instead to focus most of his attention on studying Ana, who sat across from him at the large table. He didn't want to admit how scared he'd been when he saw the emptiness and fear creep into her eyes as her body went rigid, and her face turned white. It was like she was somewhere else...somewhere horrible.

He had noted the change in her immediately and said her name, alarm filling him when she didn't respond. She had looked so...scared. What had made her so frightened? Whatever it was, it was gone now he realized as he stared at her. The color had returned to her cheeks, and her grey eyes were once again filled with the warmth he had become accustomed to seeing in them over the past few days. But gone or not, Harry was determined to find out what had caused her to react so strongly, though he had a feeling he already knew what it was. But, he wanted to help her, and the only way that was going to happen was if she opened up to him about it. He'd ask her about it later, he decided.

They stayed and talked with Hagrid for a little while longer, getting up to leave when they noted the time and Harry suggested they get back to the castle. Hagrid followed them out the door and said his goodbyes to them both before returning to his hut. Ana and Harry turned around and began walking back in silence. Harry looked at Ana and decided that now was a good time to ask her about what

had happened back there, but before he could get the words out, he noticed a figure approaching them across the lawn.

Ana noticed, too, and slowed as the figure came closer and stopped to meet them. Her initial apprehension faded, however, as Harry seemed to recognize the man and greeted him.

"Professor Lupin," Harry said, surprise evident in his voice.

Lupin stopped in front of the pair, his eyes studying Ana for a moment before returning to Harry's, nodding in greeting. "So here's where you've been," he said.

"I'm sorry, were you looking for me? Our lesson doesn't start for another hour, right?" Harry asked, a little confused. He wasn't sure why else Lupin would be out here looking for him.

Lupin smiled at this and shook his head. "No, Harry, that's not why I'm here. Actually, I was referring to her," he said, turning to Ana as he did so. Ana looked surprised, and Harry, also surprised, turned to look at her.

"Me?" she asked.

"Yes." A pause. "You are Ana, right?" he asked with a grin. She nodded. "Well, I've just come from an exceedingly frantic Madam Pomfrey. She seemed to have misplaced her patient, and I offered to help. Something told me I'd find you two together," he smiled at them, unconcerned.

Ana gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten about Madam Pomfrey. *Of course she'd be worried*, she thought to herself, feeling awful.

Harry's confusion turned to amusement at this. "You didn't tell her where you were going? You just left?" he asked, trying not to laugh. "You're braver than I am," he said, a chuckle escaping as he did. He wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of Pomfrey's wrath after a stunt like that.

Ana threw Harry a sullen look. "I didn't mean to not tell her! Besides, she never would have let me go otherwise, and I *had* to get out of that room. She's not *too* upset, is she?" she asked Lupin hopefully.

"Well..." he began, about to tell her the truth, but stopped when he saw Harry shaking his head hurriedly. "No, no not *too* upset, no," he told her, and she sighed in relief. He gave Harry a reproachful glance before turning once again to Ana.

"Remus Lupin, by the way," he said, extending his hand to her, which she shook. "Though I suppose it's Professor Lupin now that you're to be a student here."

"He's the Defense Against The Dark Arts teacher," Harry explained to her questioning look, to which she nodded.

"Oh, Harry, that reminds me. I'm afraid we won't be able to have our lesson tonight. I've been called for duty for the Order," he told him with a glance at Ana.

Harry frowned. "Really? What are you going to do?" he asked, curious. He knew it had something to do with Ana, and he wanted to know what Dumbledore was doing about the situation.

Lupin looked from Harry to Ana hesitantly, not sure if he should tell them. But, he figured she had a right to know what was being done about her parents, and so he relented. "Dumbledore's sending some of us to search the Forest. We're going to try to find the cabin, as well, though it may be a dead end," he said softly, not wishing to upset the girl, who had lowered her eyes at this.

Harry almost asked if he could help, but bit his tongue, knowing it was out of the question. Lupin would never allow it. The young wizard couldn't help feeling a little useless at that moment, however. He wanted the Carrows found more than anything, not only because of the many people they had killed, but also because of what they'd done to Ana. Anger filled him once again at the reminder. Even if he couldn't personally do anything about it, he was glad Lupin and the others were. It made him feel a little better about everything.

"Well, you two should head back. It's almost dark," Lupin told them quietly.

Harry nodded, but stopped as he remembered something. "Shoot, I left the basket at Hagrid's," he said, looking back towards the hut. "Be right back, okay?" he said to Ana, who nodded. She and Lupin both watched as Harry rushed back towards Hagrid's house.

A silence fell over them both before Lupin spoke once again. "He thinks very highly of you," he said, eyes fixed on the horizon.

Ana turned toward him, surprised. "Who? Harry?"

He nodded, a blank expression on his face. "He thinks you're very brave," he said, repeating what Sirius had told him earlier about what Harry had said about her.

She furrowed her brows at this as she tried to read the expression on the older man's face, with no luck. "Brave? But, I'm not brave," she said confused, as she turned to look at the sun setting over the lake, painting it red and orange. "If I were, I would have stopped them myself...instead of running away," she said firmly, casting her eyes downward as a pained expression came over her face.

Lupin had been testing her without her knowledge, and turned his head to study her at this unexpected response. He softened a little at the sight of her defeated posture and sighed. "You did what you thought was right, Ana. If you hadn't, you wouldn't be standing here right now," he told her gently.

Ana swallowed, saying nothing. *Better them dead than me standing here*, she thought to herself.

"Listen, Ana, I know you've had a rough time of things...but Harry has too. Just...just be careful, there..." he trailed off.

Innocent or not, Lupin wasn't sure if he wanted Harry becoming too close with this girl. Harry had enough troubles without having to worry about hers too. And just the fact that her parents were devoted and close followers of the wizard who wanted to kill Harry made him more than a little uneasy at how attached the young man was getting to her.

He just wanted Harry to be safe, and to Lupin, that meant being very careful when it came to Ana.

Ana frowned, not really understanding what Lupin meant by the comment, but before she could ask him, Harry came running back, basket in hand.

“Got it,” he grinned, lifting it up. Ana smiled at him, but Harry noticed that it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Well, I better get going. Goodnight, Ana. Harry,” he nodded to them and turned, making his way towards the Forest, wand in hand.

Harry stared after him for a moment before turning back to Ana. They began walking back to the castle; the air cooling steadily around them as the sun slowly sank beneath the horizon.

Harry studied Ana, who was being particularly quiet. “So, what did you two talk about?” he asked her finally, needing to break the heavy silence.

Ana kept her eyes forward. “Nothing important,” she told him assuredly with a small smile.

Harry, however, wouldn't let her get away with things that easy. He knew something was bothering her (as was evident by her stricken behavior in front of Hagrid's hut), and he was more than determined to get it out of her. He wouldn't let her suffer alone. He knew what that felt like, and he wouldn't allow it.

No, he wouldn't allow it, he thought as he gazed once again at the fragile girl beside him. As they climbed the steps leading to the entrance of Hogwarts, Harry glanced back towards the dark forest one more time, hoping against hope that Ana's worries would all end tonight.

Good luck, Lupin, he thought, tearing his glance away to follow Ana inside the castle.

[illegible]

Lupin, however, was having no luck at all.

The group had split up to make a wide search of the Forest, only to reconvene after finding nothing. Now he, Shackbolt, and Diggle, carefully picked their way through the trees as Tonks flew on her broom overhead, keeping an eye out for the cabin. After what seemed like hours, a triumphant cry from Tonks signaled that she had spotted it, and they surged forwards stealthily, stopping to hide behind some trees when the cabin came into view.

Tonks landed softly next to Lupin, and they all were still for a moment, listening. When nothing was heard, Lupin made a motion for them all to creep forward. When they were close enough, Kingsley and Diggle flanked the door, wands at the ready, while Lupin prepared himself to enter, Tonks at his back. He counted to three and with a tremendous crash, he blasted the door off its hinges before rushing inside, wand raised and ready for attack. His eyes took in the scene quickly, and he slowly lowered his wand at the sight.

Empty.

“Should’ve known it wouldn’t be that easy,” he mumbled, looking around the dilapidated room in disappointment.

The others swarmed in and also lowered their wands when they realized no one was there.

“Damn it!” Shackbolt swore, placing his hands on his hips.

Tonks sighed. “We’re too late. They’re long gone by now.”

Diggle looked around in disgust at the filthy cabin. “Are you sure they were even here? It doesn’t look like anyone’s been here for a hundred years, at least.”

Lupin sighed as well, but stilled as his eyes caught something on the wall near the door. “I wouldn’t be so sure, Dedalus,” he said as he walked towards the wall, crouching to get a better look. “It’s a scorch mark,” he explained softly, touching the charred, black spot on the wall, its edges tinged a deep shade of green.

Tonks moved across the room and crouched beside him, studying the deep mark. “That...that looks like—“

"The Killing Curse," Lupin finished grimly.

Only it could produce a mark like that. A tinge of guilt tugged at him as his thoughts immediately turned to Ana. She had stood in this very spot, no doubt scared to death as her parents tried to murder her using the most evil and forbidden curse there was. Maybe he shouldn't have been so hard on her...

“Poor girl,” Tonks said softly, as if reading his mind.

Lupin snapped out of his trance and rose, more determined than ever.

“All right, let’s get out of here. Dumbledore will be wanting to know what we’ve found,” he said as he walked out the door.

“Or didn’t find,” Shacklebolt mumbled angrily, shooting one last look around the room.

They filed out of the cabin and in the blink of an eye they were gone, Disapparating into the dark night back to their headquarters where Dumbledore awaited their return.

[illegible]

If the Carrows were good at anything, it was hiding.

Years of practice had nearly turned them invisible they were so skilled at it. But, now that they knew there was a chance Ana managed to survive and tell someone about them, they were forced to take extra precautions. And that meant no more staying in abandoned cabins, since it would be the first place their pursuers would look. This reasoning is what led them to the sprawling mansion where they now sat in a magnificent drawing room in quiet conversation with a close friend.

"I can't tell you how much we appreciate this, Lucius."

"Don't be silly, Alecto," Lucius drawled in a cool voice. "What kind of friend would I be not to help you with your little...problem. You may stay as long as you need. Though I don't need to remind you that no one must find out you are here. I *do* have a reputation to uphold, you know."

"Of course, of course," Alecto said irritably. He was still fuming that they had been unsuccessful at finding Ana as of yet. He hated having to resort to asking for favors, but it was necessary. "We'll be out of your hair most of the time, anyway," he continued, glancing contemptuously at his lavish surroundings. "I won't stop till she is found," he said firmly, murder in his cold, dark eyes.

"No luck at all yet, then?" Lucius asked, pouring himself a drink from a crystal decanter.

"None," Alecto grimaced from his slouched position in the overstuffed armchair he was seated on.

Andromeda, who had been lounging on a couch while rolling her wand idly in her long, manicured fingers, spoke up at this. "I've told you what needs to be done. We need to search Hogsmeade," she said to Alecto, a bored expression on her face.

Alecto glared in her direction. "And *I* told *you* that there was no way she managed *that*."

Andromeda threw a withered look at him. "And where do you suppose she went? Up a tree?" she said sarcastically.

Before Alecto could respond with his own cutting remark, Lucius jumped in. "Perhaps that would be wise, Alecto. A man in your position should consider every possibility," he told the glowering man with a meaningful glance.

At this, Alecto's scowl was wiped off his face to be replaced with one of mild apprehension. *A man in my position*. He knew what Malfoy meant by that. He had put off telling the Dark Lord about his unfortunate problem, and he knew that delaying it much longer would mean certain death. He shuddered involuntarily at the thought of

telling his powerful Lord that he had misplaced his own daughter, who was now out there now doing Merlin knew what.

Needless to say, he wouldn't be too happy about it. Perhaps it was a good idea to search the famous wizarding village of Hogsmeade. Besides, he had run out of options, and they were wasting precious time every moment they weren't searching for the little brat.

Just then, the closing of the front door was heard, and Lucius looked up at the sound.

“Draco,” he summoned, and a young man with the very same white-blond hair as Lucius came walking into the drawing room.

“This is my son, Draco,” he said to Alecto and Andromeda. “Draco, these are *friends* of mine, and they’ll be staying here for a while,” he said, placing special emphasis on the word “friends.” Draco knew what this meant immediately. Course it wasn’t hard to tell they were Death Eaters too. They had that look about them.

Draco grimaced. “For how long?” he asked rudely. He knew this meant he’d have to be on his best behavior, even more so than usual.

Lucius' eyes flashed in anger at his son's insolence. "As long as they need," he told him, gritting his teeth. "Their daughter has...gone missing. And you'll be in school soon anyways. Just keep your mouth shut about it. Is that clear?"

Draco shot a glance at the Carrows. *Missing daughter? What losers...* He sighed, realizing he didn't really care, anyways, and nodded at Lucius. "Yes Father," he said complacently. He was always eager to please his father and if this is what it took, he'd do it, he supposed.

Lucius nodded as well and signaled his permission for Draco to leave the room, which he did, shooting one last curious look at the guests before disappearing as he climbed up the stairs.

[illegible]

Harry had walked Ana back to the Hospital Wing (where they had both gotten a sharp scolding from Madam Pomfrey), and was now sitting in a chair, watching as Ana sat against the headboard of her bed. She was being very distant, hardly even flinching when Pomfrey had reproached her for not telling her where she was going. He sighed. Now was as good a time as any.

“Ana,” he said softly. She turned her head to look at him as if she were surprised he was still there. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, unconvincingly.

Harry sighed. “C’mon Ana. What happened back there?” he asked quietly.

She frowned and turned her head away. She didn’t really want to talk about it, but she knew Harry wouldn’t let her get away with that. “I...I just had a...a flashback, is all. It was silly, really. I don’t know what came over me...” she trailed off, trying to play it off with a small laugh but failing miserably because of the raw emotion in her voice.

“The Forest, you mean?” he said softly, his concerned gaze sweeping over her.

She simply nodded and he sighed again, inwardly berating himself. Why didn’t he think of that before? He should’ve known that seeing the place she had spent her most terrifying moments in would upset her. He could only imagine what she must have been reliving as she stared at it.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “I should have known it would remind you of...that.”

Ana looked up at him, furrowing her brow. “Harry, it’s not your fault. Don’t be silly. I wanted you to show me around today, and you did. We couldn’t have just not gone outside simply because I can’t look at the Forest without being reminded of...you know. Besides, we had a great time today, didn’t we?” she asked.

Harry smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, we did.”

Ana smiled too, and this time it was a genuine one. "Thank you for today. And thanks for being so concerned, even though you really shouldn't be. But I appreciate it all the same." Ana reached out and grabbed Harry's hand, squeezing it gently as she said this.

I'm starting to like being concerned about you, he thought, not daring to say it aloud. Instead he squeezed her hand right back and said, "You're welcome."

Ana slowly retracted her hand and yawned. She hadn't realized how tired she was until now. The day had taken a lot out of her, not to mention the fact that she was still puzzled by her talk with Lupin. It was too much to try to sort out at the moment, and she just didn't have the energy to try.

Harry laughed and rose. "Get some rest. I'll come see you tomorrow, okay?" he told her, smiling when she murmured some indistinct reply, her eyes already closed. He gently pulled the covers over her, taking one last look at her sleeping face.

"Welcome home, Ana," he whispered.

And with that, he walked out of the room, the shadow of a contented smile on his handsome face.

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AN: Sorry, sorry, sorry for the long wait! I haven't had a lot of time to write lately. But at least it's a long one, right? Sort of a blah chapter, but I swear things will start happening soon. Big things. Wow things. :) Okay, I'm done being a dork. Please review and tell me if you like it so far! Is it any good? Tell me what ya think! Anyways, thanks again guys and have a nice day!

Chapter 9

“Sorted? Now?”

Ana stared at the Headmaster, a little caught off-guard as he gave the reason for his visit. Harry was also there, standing beside her as she voiced her surprise. She hadn't even given a thought to which House she'd be sorted into, figuring she had at least a few more days until she had to worry about it...but now Dumbledore was telling her it was to happen today! She had a hard time wrapping her mind around it...

Dumbledore gave her an apologetic smile. “I know it is short notice, but I feel that it would be better to get it over with now, rather than in front of the whole school. You'll attract less attention that way...though I fear you will be noticed no matter what you do. At least this way you won't be on parade. Again, I am very sorry for all the precautions, but until your parents are caught, I'm afraid they'll be rather necessary...” he trailed off gently.

Ana sighed and nodded. Dumbledore had informed her of the Order's unsuccessful night. It was the first thing she had asked when he had come striding through the doors that morning. Disappointment didn't even begin to cover what she was feeling right now, but the whole ‘getting sorted today’ thing helped push it to the back of her mind for the time being.

“I also feel that I should inform you that I have arranged for you to take a small...trip, today,” Dumbledore said carefully.

“Trip?” Ana asked, confused. Harry, too, seemed puzzled by this.

Dumbledore smiled reassuringly. “Yes...but I'm getting ahead of myself. One thing at a time. Follow me.”

And with that, the Headmaster turned around and began walking out the doors, leaving behind a very confused Ana. Harry, too, seemed bewildered by what Dumbledore had said, and so could give no comfort to Ana when she threw him an inquiring glance. He shrugged,

and they both had no choice but to follow the old wizard, curiosity gleaming in their eyes.

They wordlessly made their way through the castle, stopping only when Dumbledore halted in front of the entrance to his office.

"Fizzing Whizbee," Dumbledore said calmly.

The gargoyle statue leapt aside, revealing the stone staircase behind. They all climbed the steps into Dumbledore's office, and Ana looked around in fascination. The room was beautiful, and there were gadgets and varying kinds of magical objects everywhere. The previous Headmaster's and Headmistresses in the portraits on the wall stared curiously at Harry and Ana. The two could hear snippets of their whispered conversations, catching things like, '*boy-who-lived*', '*my, he's in here quite a lot, isn't he,*' and '*must be in some sort of trouble again, eh?*'.

But Harry was not the only object of interest, for Ana distinctly heard one of the portraits say, '*who's that now?*', and '*looks a little worse for the wear, she does.*' Ana looked self-consciously down at her raggedy dress, feeling uncomfortable about her appearance for the first time as she picked nervously at the fraying edges. She knew she must look awful, but she'd never been so aware of it until this moment. It seemed every eye in the paintings was trained on her.

With a silencing look from Dumbledore, however, the portraits quieted, and he motioned for Harry and Ana to sit down. Ana looked to Harry, who gave her a comforting smile, and they both sat down on the armchairs in front of the Headmaster's desk. Dumbledore went to the shelves behind his desk and retrieved a ratty, torn hat which Ana realized must be the one they used for Sorting.

She gulped as the Headmaster approached her with it. Dumbledore asked if she was ready, and she nodded hesitantly. Harry watched eagerly as the hat was placed on Ana's head, crossing his fingers and hoping she'd be sorted into Gryffindor, though he supposed it didn't matter which House she was put in. He'd still make sure to see her as often as possible. *At least I know she won't be put into Slytherin*, he thought with some comfort.

Ana tried to remain calm and listened as the Sorting Hat spoke to her.

"Hmmm... You're much older than those I usually sort, aren't you? No matter. I can see things even you may not realize. You are very intelligent. A thirst for knowledge resides deep within you, which points to Ravenclaw...but there is something else inside you even deeper still. Courage. A desire to live, through difficulties... Yes, I see it now...GRYFFINDOR!" He spoke this last word aloud, bellowing it with clarity and assurance.

Ana gave a sigh of relief, just glad it was over, and Harry beamed at her. Dumbledore smiled as well and took the hat from Ana to place it back on the shelf.

"Congratulations, my dear," Dumbledore said kindly. Ana smiled and tried to sort it out in her head. Harry was in Gryffindor! Well, at least she knew one person. She wouldn't feel so out of place now. It was a huge relief.

"This is great, Ana!" Harry said enthusiastically. "You can read in the Common Room all you want now. And no more staying in the Hospital Wing...right Professor?" Harry said, turning to Dumbledore.

A surge of hope filled Ana as she, too, turned to the Headmaster. She *really* didn't want to stay there anymore.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I don't see why you shouldn't be able to stay in the dormitories, now that you are a Gryffindor. Unless, of course, you still need time to return to full health?" he asked her with an arch of his eyebrow, knowing full well that even if she weren't 'all better' she'd say she was.

"No! I'm fine, Professor. Back to normal again," she said hurriedly with a small laugh. It wasn't a lie. She'd actually been feeling perfectly fine since yesterday. No more aches or pains, and the cut on her forehead had healed nicely. But she supposed she would have said anything just to get out of the Hospital Wing.

Dumbledore smiled knowingly and nodded. "Very well. Now, onto the next matter of business. I've arranged for you to have a tutor," he said, speaking to Ana. "He'll be getting you caught up during the next

couple of days and when school starts you'll have an extra hour or so with him after your regular classes. We'll see how you fare at first and then we'll talk about giving you your O.W.L.'s...though I'm sure it will be some time before you're ready enough, but perhaps you'll prove a fast learner," he said grinning.

"All right," Ana nodded. She was anxious to get started on her learning anyways, so this was good news at least. "Do I start today?" she asked him.

Dumbledore clasped his hands behind his back. "No. That brings me to the trip I mentioned before."

Harry couldn't help jumping in here. "Where are we going?"

Dumbledore looked amused at Harry's use of the word 'we,' but Harry saw and simply gave him a look that said *'I'm going with, no matter what you say.'*

Dumbledore chuckled good-naturedly. "Not to worry, Harry. You'll need to go with, anyways. You haven't got any school supplies yet, either."

Realization dawned on Harry immediately at this. "Diagon Alley," he stated simply.

Dumbledore nodded. "Correct. I've connected this fireplace with the Leaky Cauldron's. You can use the Floo Network."

Harry frowned. "Professor, do you really think that's a good idea? I mean, I know Ana needs to get her wand and everything, but won't it be dangerous? Her parents could be anywhere," he said worriedly. He really wasn't comfortable with the idea of Ana leaving the safety of Hogwarts. The only thing that gave him some ease was the fact that he was going with her.

"Again, not to worry, Harry. Professor Lupin will be meeting you on the other side, and he'll be your escort. He'll be watching for anything suspicious," Dumbledore said reassuringly.

He didn't seem very worried about it, so Harry supposed it was all right. At least Lupin would be there. However, the Headmaster had neglected to tell them both that there would be Order members positioned throughout Diagon Alley, hidden just in case something *did* happen, and they were needed. The old wizard didn't want to worry the two (especially Ana) with these details. It just never hurt to be too careful...

"Well, are you ready? Harry you should go first so Ana can see how it is done," Dumbledore said.

Harry had barely risen out of his seat before Ana (who had been silent throughout all so far) spoke quietly. "I can't go, Professor," she said, head bowed, refusing to meet the Headmaster's eyes.

Dumbledore turned inquisitive eyes on her, though there was a look in them that said he already knew what she was concerned about.

Harry frowned, turning to Ana, trying to meet her downcast eyes. "Why? What is it, Ana? Are you worried about your parents? Because I swear they won't get near you—"

His vehement promise was interrupted by Ana, who chose that moment to raise her shame filled eyes to meet his own. "No, Harry. It's not that," she sighed softly, before turning her head to look out one of the large windows. She chanced a fleeting glance at Dumbledore before continuing in a near whisper. "I can't go to Diagon Alley. I...I wouldn't be able to pay for anything. I don't have any money," she finished dejectedly, picking at the edges of her dress nervously once again.

Well, so much for that dream... she thought with a sinking heart. She couldn't attend Hogwarts if she couldn't afford to pay for any supplies. It was that simple. There were probably tons of things she would need. She should have foreseen this. It would have been easier to let it go a couple of days ago. Now...now she wasn't sure she'd be able to.

"My dear, is that all that is troubling you? My, you have a talent for fretting over the insignificant, don't you?" Dumbledore teased kindly, chuckling a little.

Ana frowned, not sure if she should take offense to this or not. However, she found she hadn't the heart to as she saw the benevolence in the Headmaster's twinkling eyes. Instead, she looked at him questioningly, as if asking with her eyes for him to explain.

Dumbledore sobered a bit, though the twinkle in his eye never wavered. "I made you a promise, Ana, and I am nothing if not a man of my word. All has been taken care of. Harry here will help you find all of the essentials, and you may borrow whatever else you need from the school. Just tell them I sent you and all will be fine," he told her with a wink.

"But sir, I can't accept that!" Ana said distressfully. She wasn't about to let him pay for everything. She'd done nothing to deserve such special treatment.

"Don't fret, my dear girl. I will not take no for an answer. Besides, I am owed a few favors there, and I assure you they will be happy to do it. If it makes you feel any better, I should tell you that most of the items, save perhaps your wand, will have to be second-hand. But at least you'll have all that is needed," he told her.

"But—"

"No objections!" he interrupted forcefully, giving her a look that said the conversation was over.

Ana sighed and nodded reluctantly, knowing she'd never win this argument. "Thank you," she said softly after a moment. "I mean it. I don't know how I'm going to repay you for your kindness, but I'll find a way eventually. I promise," she told him sincerely.

Dumbledore just gave her a small smile before turning to Harry. "You first, Harry. Lupin will meet you when you come out. And be careful..." he trailed off, giving Harry a meaningful look after glancing at Ana, who failed to notice. Harry understood immediately and nodded. He'd take care of her.

With that, Dumbledore readied the fireplace. Harry stepped into it, and with a shout of "The Leaky Cauldron!" he vanished in a burst of green flames.

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Meanwhile, Lupin had walked into the dark interior of the Leaky Cauldron a few minutes before he was supposed to meet Harry and Ana. Dumbledore had connected a fireplace in one of the private parlor rooms to the Floo Network, and Lupin had gotten permission from Tom, the landlord, to use the room for this purpose (keeping details to a minimum, obviously). He was about to climb the wooden stairs that led to the private room when he heard someone call out to him as he passed the bar.

Lupin stopped and turned towards the voice, not sure he'd heard correctly. He stood for a moment, observing the bar and its patrons. It was rather empty. There was the bartender, who was currently wiping some glasses with a rag of questionable cleanliness, a tall, thin man in a dark cloak seated at the end of the bar hunched over a large mug, his face hidden in the shadows, and finally, the owner of the voice that had called out to Lupin. He stared for a moment, only to grimace in slight annoyance as he recognized the man.

Mundungus Fletcher.

Fletcher was a squat, raggedy-looking fellow with straggly reddish hair and ever-present bags underneath his dull eyes. He was also a fellow member of the Order, though Lupin (and some others) would be willing to dispute that fact. He only showed his face at meetings when it best suited his schedule, and only then if there was something in it for him personally.

It was well known that Fletcher was a shady character, mostly due to the fact that he was a small-time crook who had a habit of stealing things and drinking an enormous amount of alcohol on a daily basis. It was true that his connections to the criminal world had helped the Order in the past, but Lupin still wasn't certain he was worth having around and had no qualms about openly expressing his dislike for the dodgy man and his dealings.

But dislike or not, Fletcher was a member of the Order, and Lupin made it a point to be respectful of everyone in the alliance, even if he disagreed with his or her behavior. And so with a sigh, Lupin

reluctantly made his way over to Fletcher, who sat at the bar gesticulating drunkenly for Lupin to take a seat next to him.

Lupin ignored the offer and chose to remain standing, scrunching his nose up in disgust as the smell of Fletcher's pipe wafted over him. The green smoke it emitted always smelled something like burning socks, and the smell clung to Fletcher even when the pipe was absent. Fletcher, as always, took no notice of Lupin's behavior and grinned widely at him.

"Remus, my old friend! Fancy meeting you here! Isn't it wonderful?" he exclaimed, slurring a bit. He grabbed Lupin's hand and shook it wildly.

Lupin retracted his hand with some difficulty and scowled. "Yes, a shame it doesn't happen more often. Like at Headquarters, for instance," he said, referring to Grimmauld Place.

Fletcher seemed slightly offended at this. "Now, wait just a minute. I'll have you know I've been very busy with other assignments. Very busy," he said forcefully, his nose turned up.

Lupin glanced at the many empty mugs littering the space in front of the inebriated man and looked at him skeptically. "I can see that."

Mundungus ignored this and grinned. "Can I buy you a drink, Remus? Oy, Frank, get this man a drink, would you? Care for another...er, what was your name again?" he asked, turning to the thin man in the black cloak who gave him a hard, fleeting glance before ignoring him completely, sinking even farther into the shadows if that were possible.

Lupin took no notice and instead gave the bartender a wave of his hand, signaling he didn't want anything. "No, I can't Mundungus. I've got *business* to attend to," he said, emphasizing the word 'business' with a meaningful look. "Some of us actually have work to do."

Mundungus ignored this and seemed to sober up a bit, looking very interested. "Business you say? Doing what exactly?"

Lupin's hard glance turned slightly suspicious at the eagerness in the man's voice, and he furrowed his brows in question. "Why do you want to know? Have you suddenly become interested in what we do now?"

"Now, that's not fair Remus. I'm as much a part of the group as you are. Been faithful for years, I have," he replied indignantly.

Yeah, faithful to your bottle of Firewhiskey, Lupin thought inwardly, shooting another glance at the drained mugs.

"Look," Mundungus continued. "I just want to know what's going on. Maybe I could do something to help..."

Lupin snorted. Help? Real bloody likely that was. He was probably scheming to get some sort of personal gain out of this like he always did. But Lupin realized that he didn't have any right to withhold information from a fellow member of the Order, no matter how unreliable he was. And who knows...maybe Fletcher *could* help in some way. Merlin knew they needed all the help they could get, and the man *had* pulled through for them on several tough jobs.

So with a sigh, Lupin finally relented and looked around discretely before telling Mundungus about Ana and her parents in a whisper. He told him they were currently searching everywhere for the Carrows' whereabouts and how it was crucial they were found since they could very well try to come after Ana.

Mundungus listened intently, an intense interest beginning to form in him. The Carrows had eluded capture for years...their seizure would be a *very* big deal. It would no doubt make the wizard who finally caught them famous and well respected. Maybe he would be willing to help after all...

When Lupin finished telling him quietly why he was at the Leaky Cauldron, he looked around once more as if to be certain the others hadn't heard. The bartender was still busy cleaning glasses, and the thin man seemed too occupied with his drink at the moment to really pay attention to anything else, which set Lupin at ease.

Mundungus nodded when Lupin was done, looking lost in thought. Lupin noted the hungry look in Mundungus' eyes with some discomfort, but brushed the feeling away as quickly as it had come. He supposed he should be happy that the man actually seemed genuinely interested in the Order's goings-on for once.

Lupin glanced at the clock on the wall and realized it was time. Harry would be arriving any minute now. So with a short farewell to Mundungus (who mumbled something incoherent in response, still too lost in thought to do much else), Lupin left the bar and climbed the stairs to make his way to the private parlor where he would meet Harry and Ana only moments from now.

Little did he know that the seemingly indifferent cloaked man sitting at the bar, who was also deep in his own thoughts about the conversation he had just overheard, watched his departure closely. He turned back to his drink when Lupin had disappeared from view and smiled discretely to himself as he finished off the mug.

Well isn't this just my lucky day...

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Harry felt the familiar dizzying effects of traveling by Floo as he came out of the fireplace and into the room at the Leaky Cauldron. His head was spinning slightly, so it took him a moment to get his bearings. Lupin had walked through the door to the room only milliseconds before Harry arrived.

"Hello Harry," Lupin nodded to him as he walked further into the room. Harry shook his head once more to clear it and nodded in greeting to Lupin. "Where's Ana?" the older man asked.

"She should be here any moment now..." Harry told him, turning towards the fireplace expectantly.

Ana (having never traveled by Floo before) fared much worse than Harry when she came through the fireplace. The dizziness had caused her to lose her balance, and she felt herself falling as she was thrust into the room. She braced herself for the fall but soon found

she needn't have worried as she felt strong arms envelop her, preventing her from hitting the ground. She looked up into the grinning face of Harry, who held her up supportively.

"You okay?" he asked her, and it took her a moment to nod in response.

Her stomach was doing flip-flops, and she wasn't sure if it was because of the Floo or the fact that Harry's arms around her felt so wonderful. She reluctantly pulled herself from his hold; confident she could now stand on her own. The dizziness was dissipating, but the odd fluttering in her stomach refused to go away.

"Don't worry. You'll get used to it eventually," he told her smiling. It took her a moment to realize he was talking about the Floo...not the butterflies in her stomach. She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to *that*.

After greeting Lupin, they both followed him out the door and downstairs. Lupin shot a glance towards the bar before leading the two out into the alley. Mundungus was nowhere to be seen, and it seemed the other man had parted as well. Only the bartender remained, still wiping down what seemed to be a never-ending supply of glasses.

Lupin opened the magic portal that led to Diagon Alley, and they walked through it onto the cobbled street lined with shops beyond.

Lupin sent a searching glance at their surroundings, satisfied with what he saw. Being the middle of the week, it wasn't too crowded like it would be in a few days when most of the students did their shopping. But Lupin knew not to be too worried, since a few Order members were keeping a sharp eye on them, even if they were unseen at the moment.

He turned to Harry and Ana and nodded at them. "Alright, all looks well. You two go on and get whatever you need. I'll be close behind, but don't mind me," he told them both.

"Sounds good," Harry replied before turning to Ana. "Let's go. I'll show where everything is," he told her before steering her forward.

“Okay,” she replied distractedly.

She was far too busy studying her surroundings. Diagon Alley was quite a place. She read the various shop names with interest as they passed. There was The Apothecary, Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor (which had numerous tables covered with brightly colored umbrellas outside), Eeylops Owl Emporium, and countless others that all looked fascinating. They made their way to Gringotts first, however, since Harry told her he needed to get some money.

That done, they made their way into the essential shops, Ana becoming more and more comfortable as they went along, even having some fun. She got her robes from the second hand robe shop, not minding in the slightest that they were of lesser quality. She couldn’t believe she was actually getting school robes. It made her really feel like a student for the first time since Dumbledore had told her she was to be one.

They went into the Scribbulus Everchanging Inks shop to get stationary items, such as quills and parchment. She finally got her wand at Ollivander’s (Unicorn Hair, Ivy), excited beyond belief when she gave it a wave for the first time to test it. Harry laughed, seeing the pure joy on her face. They also stopped at Flourish and Blotts to get the required books for sixth years. When they were outside again (Lupin trailing not far behind), Harry smiled as his eyes caught a colorful looking shop across the street.

He turned to her, grinning largely. “Come on. I want to show you something,” he said, grabbing her free hand with his own, leading her to the shop.

She looked curiously at the front of the store, which stood out from all the others immensely with its bright entrance. She read the name of the shop with some amusement. *Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes...what a funny name...*

They entered the store, and Ana found that the interior was even more colorful than the outside, if that were at all possible. There were a few customers hanging around, almost all of whom had a great big grin on their face as they tried out what looked to be joke items and gag gifts. Every so often a small explosion was heard from different

areas of the store (which Harry recognized as the ever popular Weasleys' Wild-Fire Whiz-Bangs), and objects whirled and buzzed in all directions.

Suddenly a voice cut through the store happily. "Oy, Harry!"

Harry and Ana both looked in the direction it came from to see a tall, freckled, red-headed young man approaching them with a big grin on his face.

Harry grinned too. "Hey Fred!"

"How are ya, mate?" Fred said, clapping him on the back. "You're here a bit early aren't you? Oh hello..." he said, noticing Ana for the first time. "Who's this, then?"

"This is Ana," Harry said.

Ana shook his hand, but it was brief due to a cry of triumph that carried loudly throughout the entire store. Fred whipped around in the direction of it, looking excited beyond belief.

"Did you get it! What happened?" he cried towards the back of the store. Ana peered around him to get a better look at the person now approaching and was astonished when she saw Fred's exact replica come into view. The only difference was the slightly charred hair and black smudges all over his face, which currently beamed with pure joy.

"It worked!" the other twin said, slightly dazed though still grinning for all he was worth. "I can't believe it! It'll sell like hotcakes, Fred! Everyone will be lining out the door for--," He stopped abruptly when he caught sight of Harry, and his grin grew in size. "Harry old boy! What the blazes are you doing here? No offense, it's great to see you mate! Been ages it seems," he said excitedly.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, I know. Good to see you, too, George."

"Hey, is that Lupin? What's he doing here?" Fred said, catching sight of the man for the first time.

Lupin was currently hovering near the entrance, looking like he was trying his hardest not to look very amused by his surroundings. He was on the job, after all...

Harry and Ana exchanged a look before Harry answered carefully. "Oh, he's just...er, looking out for me. Dumbledore asked him to. You know, with all the things that have been happening lately..." he trailed off, referring to the recent attacks in all the newspapers that had been making headlines for a few weeks now. He felt bad lying to the twins, but he knew it wouldn't be smart to tell them about Ana and her parents.

"Wicked," George said, slightly awed and immediately understanding Harry's meaning. He threw a wave in Lupin's direction, who returned it with a nod.

"Boys," he said in greeting.

George and Fred turned their attention back to Harry, though George stared at Ana curiously as if just noticing her presence. "George," he told her, pointing to himself with a thumb.

Ana laughed a little and copied him. "Ana," she said with a smile.

When Ana wasn't looking, George threw Harry a sly grin before giving him a thumbs up. Harry reddened slightly at this and decided to change the subject as quickly as possible.

"So, what's this next big invention?" he said hurriedly. It did the trick.

Fred and George immediately perked up at the mention of it. "It's not the 'next big invention,' Harry," Fred told him.

"It's THE invention," George finished breathlessly.

"The greatest invention of all great inventions!"

"The cream of the crop!"

"Best in show!"

“The one and only!”

“Our pride and joy!” they finished in unison.

Ana couldn't help but smile and be almost as excited as the twins were, even though she had no idea what it was she was supposed to be so excited about. Harry, too, seemed eager to find out what it was that had the twins so giddy,

“Well, what is it, then?” he asked, looking from one twin to the other.

The twins exchanged an evil grin. “Come see for yourself, Harry,” George said.

Harry and Ana followed Fred and George towards the back of the store and into a backroom that was used for storage and no doubt other inventions, as there were numerous crumpled papers discarded here and there, along with a blackboard nearly white it had so many figures on it.

But what caught Harry and Ana's attention the most, however, was a small object sitting in the middle of a large table in the center of the room. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be a spindly little thing standing upon four legs, with what slightly resembled a miniature typewriter of some sort sitting on top, though without the keyboard. It was a gleaming gold in color, and Harry had never seen anything like it. Ana studied it intently, trying to deduce what its purpose was.

Finally her curiosity got the best of her and she asked, “What is it?”

Fred grinned at her. “We call it...The Trick Tumbler!” he said, pausing dramatically for effect.

“It'll make us famous!” George said.

“Well, more like infamous, really,” Fred corrected with a smug smile.

“Trick Tumbler?” Harry said, looking from one to the other. “What's it do?”

"It's the ultimate prank item! Never again be left wondering what joke to pull on your friends (or enemies) next!" George said, imitating an advertisement.

"Tired of the same standard, boring tricks? Well then have we got the thing for you!" Fred said, following his brother's lead.

"No more juvenile 'tying the shoe laces together,' no sir! In mere moments the Trick Tumbler will solve your joker's block woes! Creative and unparalleled ideas guaranteed!" George added, grinning at Fred.

Harry's eyebrows shot up in amusement. "How does it work?" he asked.

"Well, let us tell you," Fred said, picking up the golden Tumbler as he did. "First, you tell the Trick Tumbler the name of the person you want to prank."

"Then," George continued, "you wait. When the Tumbler determines the best prank suitable for the unknowing person, it spits out a piece a parchment with all the details."

"Yeah, but here's the genius part," Fred went on. "Not only does it determine which prank suits that given person best (all items of which can be found exclusively at our shop), but it also tells you the perfect time and place to do it, along with instructions on how to perfectly execute the trick for the full effect!"

"Here, let me show you," George said, grabbing the Tumbler from Fred's hand. "Harry Potter!" he said clearly into it.

There was a whirring, mechanical noise that sounded like gears turning, and not a moment later, a small piece of yellowed parchment shot out of the top of it. Fred yanked it out and gave it to Harry, who watched in fascination as a golden script scrawled words along the page. Ana, too, watched in amazement. It read:

Harry Potter

Most susceptible to: The Exploding Snitch! Coerce your friend into an innocent game of Quidditch and watch as he gets the shock of his life! Must allow him to catch the Snitch...but don't worry, you'll be the real winner of this game! (Available now at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes; special discount given if Tumbler ticket is shown).

Place: Hogwarts Quidditch Field

Time: Tomorrow after lunch looks promising...

Cheers!

Harry couldn't help the grin that sprung to his face. "This is brilliant!" he exclaimed, looking at the two of them, who looked right proud of themselves. Harry knew that every kid at Hogwarts was going to want one, and Fred and George would be raking in the profits. He couldn't be happier for them. If anyone deserved it, it was them.

"It's got hundreds of various kinds of pranks programmed into it," Fred told him excitedly. "And that's not all. This is the Deluxe version," he said, pointing to the Trick Tumbler.

"You mean there's more to it?" Ana couldn't help asking. She didn't know what else they could do to it to make it better than it already was.

George nodded. "Yeah, you see this button here?" he said, pointing to a miniscule red button on the side of it. "It's for emergency pranks only."

"When you need to get revenge *right* away," Fred added.

"If you happen to find yourself in a situation like this, you just push the button and it will show you *exactly* where the person is at that very moment," George said.

"Including various methods of surprising them. You know, so you can sneak up and get them *real* good. Or if you just plain want to scare the living daylight's out of them! Whatever suits your fancy," Fred continued.

“It’s the modern Marauder’s Map of our age, Harry!” George beamed at him.

“Only it’s our version of it. We have to admit, we wouldn’t have gotten the idea if it wasn’t for the original one,” Fred said.

Harry shook his head at them in awe, grinning from ear to ear. “You’re bloody brilliant. Both of you. Only you guys could think up something like this,” he commended, feeling proud that the twins had put the money he had given them from the Triwizard Tournament to good use. Well, what they considered ‘good’, at least...

They both shined with pride at this. “Press the button, George,” Fred told his twin, wanting to show their audience what it could do.

George pressed it without hesitation. The whirring noise began again, only this time it didn’t sound quite as smooth as before. The parchment was coming out slowly, and there was a jumble of nonsensical words scrawling across it. Finally a small clank was heard and the whirring stopped completely.

“Er, I guess it’s got a few kinks that still need to be worked out,” George said, slightly disappointed. Fred grabbed the thing and started shaking it and holding it up to his ear.

“Bugger,” he groaned when none of his ministrations were successful. The two of them looked thoroughly downtrodden. They’d been so close...

Ana looked at their crestfallen faces and couldn’t help the words that came out of her mouth next. “Well, I think it’s the most clever invention I’ve ever seen. You two must be very good at charms to have done it. I think everyone’s going to go crazy for it when it’s finished, don’t you Harry?” she asked turning to him.

“Yeah, definitely,” he said assuredly, watching the twins’ faces brighten once again at Ana’s kind, encouraging words. He smiled at her warmly, silently commending her for it. She returned it easily.

“Thanks! You’ve no idea how long we’ve been working on it,” George said to them smiling.

“Well, you’ll just have to get back to work then, won’t you,” Harry grinned.

The twins looked at each other and nodded. “Good idea,” Fred said.

“Yeah, loads to do Harry. Sorry we can’t talk more,” George said quickly shaking Harry’s hand, his mind already at work.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be sure to get you one when were through! Good to meet you,” Fred told Ana before turning distractedly to the blackboard where he erased a good portion of it.

And with that, the twins had jumped into action, talking hurriedly about ways to fix the Tumbler. Harry just laughed and led Ana out the door where Lupin was waiting.

“Well, that was...interesting,” Ana laughed, looking back at the colorful shop.

Harry laughed too. “Yeah, they’re...well, they’re Fred and George, I suppose. No other words can describe them.”

“Well, they’re great. I can’t believe that invention of theirs! Wonder how they did it...” she said, her mind returning to the funny looking Trick Tumbler.

Harry and Ana walked across the street, lost in conversation about the wacky invention, both laughing their heads off as they thought about it again. It really was quite brilliant. They stopped at some vendors out on the street, looking at the various items for sale, while Harry told Ana all sorts of Fred and George stories. She had to plead with him to stop a few times, she was laughing so hard. Harry just laughed right along with her, and it struck him quite suddenly as he looked at her beaming face that he hadn’t had this much fun in a long time. It was nice.

Lupin hung back from them both, trying to seem unobtrusive. He had the strangest feeling that he was intruding somehow. They both looked so happy and lost in their own little world. He couldn’t help the reluctant smile that crawled across his face. Harry looked happier

than he'd seen him in a long time, and his heart warmed at the sight. Perhaps this wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Harry watched Ana as she examined some colorful cauldrons at one of the vendor's carts and smiled. He loved the way her eyes lit up at even the tiniest things. It made him want to do things for her just to see that look in their silver depths again. His eye caught Flourish and Blotts as he looked around, and an idea struck him suddenly. He grinned as a plan formed in his mind and turned to Ana.

“Ana, wait here, okay? I’ll be right back,” he told her, looking around her to see that Lupin was still nearby. It made him feel better at leaving her alone, if only for a few minutes.

Ana turned to him in surprise, the cauldrons forgotten. "Where are you going?" she asked him.

He just grinned at her. "It's a surprise. I'll be back before you know it, trust me, alright?"

Ana bit her lip and gave Harry a searching glance. "Alright," she said finally, curiosity brewing from deep within her. *What's he up to?*

“Good. Just...stay right here,” he told her before rushing off in the direction of the bookshop.

Ana watched him go and shrugged turning back to the vendor's cart. She supposed she'd find out what Harry was up to soon enough.

In the meantime, Lupin was currently being accosted by one of the street peddlers, who was shoving various kinds of brightly colored quills in the man's face and pestering him to buy some. Lupin was having a hard time getting a word in over the persistent man's grating voice.

This was just the distraction the thin man hidden across the street, concealed in shadow, had been waiting for...

[illegible]

Cabe McCracken watched the two smiling youths with a creeping feeling of disgust and loathing as he absentmindedly scratched the arm on which his new tattoo was located. It was starting to irritate him a little bit. Nobody ever told him a Dark Mark would itch so bad.

*But no matter...*he thought, brushing the small annoyance off as he continued to stare at the young man and woman across the street, his eyes lingering on the dark-haired girl.

Anabelle Carrows.

It was her all right. The description Alecto had given of her fit perfectly, not that he even needed to know what she looked like after that fool in the bar had revealed everything. McCracken grinned at this. He couldn't believe his good fortune.

Alecto, in a fit of panic, had come to them all secretly, imploring them to keep on the lookout for his good-for-nothing, brat of a daughter, who had managed to escape somehow a few days ago. McCracken scowled as he thought of the man, clenching his fists in ill-concealed anger. Alecto hadn't even told him about the situation personally, he had had to hear it from one of the others. Apparently Carrows felt that he wouldn't be up to the task, seeing as how he'd only just joined their side.

The only comfort McCracken felt at the offensive situation was the fact that Alecto actually believed he could keep this a secret from the Dark Lord until he had found his daughter. McCracken laughed silently at this thought.

What a fool...

He'd only been with the Dark Side for a month, and even he knew better than that. The Dark Lord knew all, and if he didn't know about the girl yet, he would...and soon. McCracken would make sure of it. What better revenge for Carrows' disrespect than killing the girl himself and taking all the glory when he informed his Lord of what he had done.

An unexpected surprise that Harry Potter was accompanying her. Apparently they'd made friends. But Potter, no matter how tempting,

flash of green light nearly blinded her, and she heard the two words she'd prayed never to hear again.

"Avada Kedavra!"

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AN: Oh, please don't hate me. I know it's an *awful* cliffie, but I'm sorry! I had to do it. Well, I suppose I didn't *have* to, but this chapter would have been *ridiculously* long if I hadn't. But I really am sorry! I hope you like this chapter anyway, despite it's evil ending :). And once again, I am sorry for the wait. I'll try really hard to get the next chapter up sooner, but I can't make any promises. Please review and tell me what you think! I love reading your comments. Thanks guys and have a great day!

P.S. Mundungus is a little OOC in my story, but it will be necessary later on. Just to let you know! Okay, bye now!

Chapter 10

She barely had time to scream before the flash of green light nearly blinded her, and she heard the two words she'd prayed never to hear again.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Harry walked out of the bookshop into the sunlight, a small grin plastered on his face. It had only taken him a moment to find what he had been looking for. The owner of the shop had only been too happy to fill a special request from *the* Harry Potter. Ana was going to love it. Or at least he hoped she would.

At the reminder of Ana, he looked up in the direction of the carts to find her. Some people were currently blocking his view, but they moved on after a moment, and she finally came into sight. He started to smile and move towards her when he noticed the look on her face. Something was wrong.

She was white with terror, her gaze fixed on something in front of her.

His smile vanished instantly, and he turned his head to see what had turned her to stone. There, from across the street, a man in a billowing black cloak was making his way towards her, and Harry's heart turned to ice when he saw the wand outstretched in his hand... pointed directly at Ana.

He didn't need to think. Didn't have time to wonder where Lupin was or who the man could be. Didn't have time to reach for his own wand. He merely followed his instincts and obeyed the command his brain gave him at the sight of Ana in danger.

Run!

He dropped the bag he'd been carrying without a second thought and launched himself towards her, silently praying he'd get there before the spell hit her.

At almost the exact moment as she heard the terrifying words, Ana felt something massive collide with her body. She felt herself falling towards the earth, and she closed her eyes, anticipating the pain she would almost certainly feel when she hit the hard ground. Much to her surprise, however, the pain never came, and she felt herself land on something much softer than the cobbled street.

Am I dead?

She was breathing hard and fast, her senses slowly returning to her. Her heart pounded against her chest at an unnatural speed, but as she slowly opened her eyes, she realized that her own heartbeat was not the only one she'd been feeling.

Harry held her atop him with his arms enclosed protectively around her body, and he stared back into her eyes with a fierce intensity that Ana couldn't look away from. She was pressed tightly against his chest. He held on to her for dear life, so close she could hear his heartbeat easily matching the pace of her own.

Harry looked into her eyes, concern growing in him as he saw the slightly dazed, out-of-focus look in them. Was she hurt? He had felt the *whoosh* of the powerful spell fly past as he grabbed Ana. It had just missed them, instead finding its mark on the vendor cart behind them (which was now smashed to pieces). He'd twisted his body around in mid-air in order to prevent her from feeling what he was now. The air had been knocked out of him, and his head ached from where it had hit the ground.

But at least she was safe. She was safe right?

"Are you all right?" he asked finally, still piercing her stare with his own.

Ana looked down at him, slowly coming out of her trance. "Yeah..." she whispered, barely audibly. "I...I think so."

What the hell had just happened? She remembered being terrified about something...A man. There was a man. He had tried to...to kill her? But why? At this thought, her mind returned to Harry, and she stared at him as though seeing him for the first time.

He'd saved her life.

Before she could ponder this further, a voice suddenly interrupted her thoughts. It was laced with worry and concern. "Merlin...Are you both okay? Are you hurt?" It was Lupin. He helped Ana to her feet (she was still atop Harry), and Harry slowly rose as well. His hand immediately went to the back of his head, rubbing it.

"Fine," Harry said distractedly. He was too busy staring at Ana. She looked shaken. Her face was still deathly pale, and she was trembling slightly. He was by her side in an instant, gathering her into his arms comfortingly. She welcomed the embrace and felt her pounding heart calm slightly.

"What the hell happened?" Harry asked Lupin angrily as he held the frightened girl in his arms, though it wasn't directed at Lupin. He was more furious at himself than anything else. He shouldn't have left her alone.

A guilty look swept over Lupin's face at the question. He opened his mouth to answer when Tonks suddenly appeared at his side. "We got him, Remus," she said quietly.

Surprised at her sudden appearance, Harry turned to look behind her, noticing for the first time the small scene that was taking place in the middle of the road.

A crowd was gathered around a tangle of people in the street. People were speaking in hushed whispers as they looked on.

"Did you see that?" "Tried to kill that girl, he did!" "In broad daylight, too." "Can you believe it?"

At first Harry couldn't make out who they were, but when a few of the onlookers moved to the side, the men in the middle of it all came into view.

Two Order members were holding the wiry looking man (currently thrashing violently about) in place while Shacklebolt stood in front of him, looking furious. Harry noted with some satisfaction that the thin

man currently had a bloody lip, no doubt from a punch he'd received from Shacklebolt by the looks of it.

But Harry didn't think it was enough. Anger filled him as he stared at the man who had tried to hurt Ana. He fingered his wand, seriously considering showing the man some of his own wrath. Before he could even finish deciding which hex to torture him with, however, Tonks' voice sounded once more.

"He's definitely a Death Eater. And a fairly new one from the looks of his arm. Probably explains why he'd be so rash and attack in broad daylight. Not a very smart one," she told Lupin. Her eyes drifted back towards the apprehended man, who seemed to be yelling something now.

"Let go! I'll kill all of you for this! There's no point trying to protect the girl...even if you catch the Carrows, the Dark Lord will finish her off! He'll finish all of you! Every last—"

His voice died abruptly when he received yet another hit from Shacklebolt, this time in the stomach. He hunched over, his face screwed up in pain.

"Shut up. You're in no position to be making threats," Shacklebolt hissed.

Ana had moved even closer to Harry at the man's words, if that was at all possible, and buried her head into his shoulder. Harry's gripped her tight against him. His eyes darkened, throwing daggers at the man.

"Get him out of here," Lupin said to Tonks. He looked even more drawn and tired than usual. "Take him into questioning. Find out anything you can," he told her, running a hand over his face.

Tonks shot a concerned glance at him and looked as if she wanted to say more. She thought better of it, however. Instead, she simply put a comforting hand on his shoulder and nodded. She gave him one last meaningful look before she turned away to tell the others.

Harry was too busy with Ana to notice anything else. She was trying to loosen herself from Harry's grip, feeling slightly embarrassed about how she was reacting, but he wouldn't let her.

"You're not getting away, Ana, so stop trying," he told her with a grin, knowing what she was thinking. He released her enough to see the slightly shocked look on her face and laughed.

Ana, too, laughed a little at this. He wasn't fooling anyone. He was trying to make her feel better by lightening the mood of a very dark situation...and boy was it working. Appreciation shone in her eyes as she smiled up at him. "*Thanks for that,*" they seemed to say.

Their little moment was interrupted by Lupin when he came walking up to them after seeing the others off. "Let's get you both back to Hogwarts. Enough excitement for today, eh?" he said, trying to smile but failing miserably at it.

Harry and Ana were just about to agree when an old, kind faced woman approached them. "Young man, I believe you dropped this," she said to Harry. In her hand was the bag from Flourish and Blotts that he had dropped. The one with Ana's surprise in it.

He took it from her gratefully. "Thank you," he said.

The woman merely gave him a wink, grinning as she walked off. Ana looked at the bag, then at Harry in question.

"Later," he told her, smiling.

He grabbed her hand and led her towards The Leaky Cauldron, Lupin trailing behind. They made their way up the stairs and into the room once more, where their bags of supplies were waiting. Lupin turned to them both, though addressed Ana.

"I am very sorry, Ms. Brighton. I'm afraid I let you down today. It was my job to make sure nothing happened, and I allowed myself to be distracted. I know I have no right to ask, but please forgive me for my lack of judgment. I can't tell you how much I regret what just happened out there." Lupin spoke calmly and sincerely. His tired and

worn face spoke volumes about how truly sorry he was. He needn't have said a word about it.

Ana was slightly taken aback at how stricken he looked over the whole thing, not to mention the fact that he had just referred to her as “Ms. Brighton” instead of Ana like he had before. *He’s blaming himself*, she realized. No. There’s no way she could allow that.

“Professor, please, it wasn’t your fault. There’s nothing to forgive,” she told him pleadingly. She didn’t want anyone blaming themselves for the mess she had gotten herself into. They were *her* parents, after all.

Lupin merely gave her a sad smile and said, “You two should get going. Tell Dumbledore what happened and that I’ll contact him when I get back.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Harry frowned.

"I'm afraid not, Harry. I promise we'll get back to our lessons tomorrow. Now go," Lupin said, looking a bit distracted. Like he was trying to sort out too many thoughts at one time.

Harry just nodded and let Ana go ahead of him. When she vanished into the fire, he turned to look at Lupin one last time before leaving. The man was staring out the window with a frown, looking a bit lost and oblivious to Harry's stare.

Ana had been right. It wasn't his fault. But knowing Lupin, he'd probably beat himself up about it anyways. None of them could have foreseen this.

Harry had faith in Lupin. In the Order. Despite what happened today, he knew they were doing the best they could to catch the Carrows. He just hoped their best was good enough.

Lupin's determined face was the last thing he saw before the green flames engulfed him.

[illegible]

Sirius was going mad.

Not only did he have to stay cooped up in his family's creepy, old house most of the time, he was also forced to feel absolutely helpless whenever something big happened.

Like right now, for instance.

He paced up and down in the living room, unable to keep still. Every now and then he would run a hand through his long, black hair. The constant movement, however, was doing little to calm his nerves. The heavy, moth-eaten curtains were drawn, leaving the musty room almost as dark as the moonless night outside.

He had known Harry and Ana were going to Diagon Alley today. His lesson with Harry had had to be put off because of it. He never liked it when Harry had to leave Hogwarts, no matter what the reason was. It made him worried as hell.

He wondered briefly if this was what a parent felt every time they weren't in sight of their child. If so, he didn't understand why anyone in his right mind would want a child. This constant state of worry was something he could definitely live without.

It didn't help that Harry was the target of quite possibly the most evil wizard ever to walk the Earth. No, that didn't help at all.

Oddly enough, however, Harry wasn't the main focus of his thoughts at this moment. Harry could take care of himself. He'd proven that before. But Ana...

Ana was a different story. When Dumbledore had contacted him earlier and told him what had almost happened today he'd panicked slightly, cursing himself for not being there. Harry had been the first thing he'd asked about, and after being reassured of his safety, his thoughts turned to the frail, shy girl he had met yesterday.

She wouldn't stand a chance against a Death Eater. If Harry hadn't been there...

No. No use in thinking of that. They were both safe at Hogwarts once again, and that's all that mattered.

Perhaps she could sit in on some lessons...Obviously she needed to learn defense in any form she could. He had a feeling this wouldn't be the last time her life was threatened. Not with the Carrows still out there.

His musings were interrupted by the sound of Lupin's footsteps drawing nearer. *He must have just come in*, Sirius thought. *Thank Merlin*. Now he could set his mind at ease a little and find out what happened.

Lupin appeared in the doorway, not even meeting Sirius' eyes as he immediately made for the couch. He sat down and closed his eyes, leaning his head back as he did so. He looked terrible. It wasn't even a full moon tonight, and he looked terrible. Sirius went to the cabinet and poured out a glass of Firewhiskey before offering it to his friend.

Lupin peered out of one eye at the glass, shaking his head at it.

"Drink it, Remus. You look like you need it," Sirius said gently, but gave him a look that said he wouldn't take no for an answer.

Lupin sighed and grabbed the glass, downing it in one gulp. It tasted awful, but he made no face as the liquid burned down his throat.

When Sirius was satisfied that a little color had returned to his cheeks, he asked Lupin the question he'd been dying to ask all day.

"What happened?"

Lupin heaved another sigh and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "It was a disaster. Hardly got any information at all from the man."

"Who was he? Anyone we know?" Sirius asked eagerly.

"No. He had only just joined a month ago. Name's McCracken," Lupin told him. He was getting frustrated all over again just thinking about it.

Sirius looked impressed. "How'd you get that out of him?"

Lupin frowned a bit as the memory of the questioning came back to him. "Shacklebolt used some rather...unconventional methods to get him to talk," he said carefully.

Sirius grinned. "I always liked Kingsley. Good man," he said wistfully. He wished he'd been there to see it.

Lupin scowled at him, though wasn't the least bit surprised at Sirius' words. He knew what was going on in that head of his, too. "It was completely against standard procedure," Lupin said reproachfully, ever the rule follower.

"Come now, Rem, you can't tell me you wished he hadn't. The man tried to kill an innocent girl! He deserved everything Kingsley gave him," Sirius said firmly, challenging Lupin to disagree.

Lupin held his ground for a moment, staring determinedly back into his friend's eyes. But then he sighed and relented, nodding almost imperceptibly to show he agreed. There's really no room for rules when an innocent life is at stake, is there?

Sirius softened as he looked at his exhausted friend and decided to change the subject. "So did he tell you anything about the Carrows?"

"Nothing at first. But it didn't take long for him to open up. Apparently he's not on very good terms with them. Kept going on about how they thought he wasn't good enough, or something. At any rate, he said he didn't know where they were hiding, but he knew that they'd been sniffing around Hogsmeade recently. That's all he could or would tell us. He's awaiting his trial now," Lupin told him.

"Hogsmeade? Did you go?" Sirius asked, feeling slightly ill at ease. Hogsmeade was within walking distance of Hogwarts. Not good.

"Yes. That's what took me so long to get back. I had to question the whole village it seemed like, and even after all that, I hardly learned anything. The only person who seemed to have seen any sign of them was Madame Rosmerta and thank Merlin for her. She said a suspicious looking fellow came in yesterday asking about a girl."

"Alelecto?" Sirius wondered.

"Had to be. Anyways, she told me she had a feeling something wasn't right about the situation. Why would a grown man come into taverns to ask about a girl? She said she got the feeling that whoever this girl was, she didn't want to be found, so she thought quickly and gave him a false story. She told him she had seen a strange girl come into town a few days ago and get a ride on one of the many carriages that pass through all the time. She told me he seemed to buy it, and that she was glad I had come in, because she was just about to contact Dumbledore about it. Apparently he told her to keep an eye out for anything suspicious, though he failed to be specific about it, since she seemed to have no idea about Ana."

"Always one step ahead that Dumbledore, isn't he?" Sirius marveled, shaking his head.

Lupin nodded in agreement. "Yes, well, at least that should keep them off Ana's trail for a little while. That was a close call."

Sirius nodded silently, looking lost in thought. So they didn't know she was at Hogwarts. Well, that was comforting. How long would that last, though? Would they be able to catch them before it was too late and they did find out? He sighed. All he could do was hope.

And not a whole lot else, he thought ruefully.

He looked over to Lupin and smiled slightly at the sight. His friend looked as though he would nod off at any moment.

"Get some rest, Rem. You've had a long day," he told him gently and patted him on the back. He made his way to the door; intent on going up to his room and getting some sleep himself. Just as he was about to walk out, however, he paused and turned to him once more.

"You did well today, my friend," he said, meaning it.

Lupin just looked up at him from where he was still sitting on the couch, saying nothing. Sirius turned to go when his soft voice stopped him.

“Sirius?”

Sirius turned round again to look at Lupin with an inquiring glance.

Lupin sat still for a moment, saying nothing, and then, “You’re doing well, too. Here, I mean. James would be very proud of you.” He said it quietly and with certainty.

He knew it wasn’t easy for Sirius to stay here, forced to be completely helpless. He knew Sirius would give his right arm to be right out there with him in his search for the Carrows, or any Death Eater, for that matter. What he’d said was true. James *would* be proud of him. Proud of his sacrifice.

Sirius stilled, a look of sadness filling his eyes. But it was gone in an instant, and instead he looked at Lupin with what could only be described as appreciation. He forced a small smile onto his face, and with a slight bow of his head, he was gone.

Lupin sighed yet again and settled back into the cushions, his mind drifting to the past. To better days. Days when the Marauders ruled the school known as Hogwarts. Days when all that mattered was seeing how much trouble they could all get into when others were asleep in their dorms. Well, more like how much trouble Sirius and James could get into. Days when James was still alive...days when they were all happy and carefree.

The clock struck the late hour with an echoing tone. The minutes flew by, but Lupin hardly noticed. His mind was somewhere else, refusing to slow down enough for him to sleep.

It was going to be another long night.

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Hogwarts loomed silently out of the starlit night, looking for all appearances to be asleep at this late hour. Only one sight betrayed the fact that this was not entirely true.

From the grounds outside, a single light high up on one of the many towers could be seen burning from within the imperious castle. There, a window framed the small figure of a girl alone with her thoughts.

The Gryffindor Common Room was bathed in the glow of the soft firelight, sending rippling shadows dancing across the walls. All was silent and still. The only sound that could be heard was the faint breathing of the girl staring out over the darkened grounds from her window seat.

Ana, however focused she appeared to be on the outside, studied the dark night with unseeing eyes as she hugged her knees to her chest on the cushioned seat. She hadn't said much since her return from Diagon Alley. Everything that had happened was far too fresh in her mind to talk about. Harry must have sensed this, because he had allowed her to retire to bed early without trying to get her to open up to him.

Now she almost wished she had. After getting settled in what was to be her dorm room for the entire school year, she had tried to get some sleep in the hopes that her mind would be clearer in the morning. But sleep never came.

She had come down to the Common Room instead to try and sort out her thoughts. There was something very comforting about the room. She felt more at ease here, unlike in her dormitory, which seemed far too...empty. Here, she could relax and think freely about the day's events...well, maybe not relax. There was hardly anything 'relaxing' about the thoughts that whirled through her now.

She had almost died today. That man, whoever he was, was going to kill her. *Wanted* to kill her. Dumbledore had told her he was a Death Eater...just like them. Her parents. What had happened today had made the danger she was in terrifyingly more real. The past few days had lulled her into a false sense of security. They had made her believe she was safe. She'd almost begun to think that maybe her parents would forget about her. Maybe they wouldn't come after her after all.

She couldn't have been more wrong.

How could she have been so foolish? They still wanted her dead. Of course they did. And they had almost succeeded today. If it hadn't been for Harry...

Harry.

She closed her eyes at the reminder of what he had done that day. He'd saved her life. If he hadn't been so quick on his feet...she'd be dead right now. Dead.

She opened her eyes and found herself staring back at her own reflection in the glass of the window. She studied her face with a frown. Why had he done that? He'd risked his life for her...The spell could just as easily have hit him.

Oh Gods! What if it had?

This terrifying thought sent chills running up and down her spine. She would never forgive herself if something happened to Harry because of her. Never. The thought alone of him dead...

No...no she couldn't even bring herself to finish that thought. It was too painful. Harry couldn't die. She cared too much about him.

With a start, her mind went back to this sudden thought. *Cared?* Where had that come from? Did she really care for him? The answer came to her easily.

Yes. Yes, she did care for him. She cared for him very much. He'd been more than kind to her. He'd made her feel at ease here. He'd showed her that there was more to life than fear.

He saved my life.

Perhaps in more ways than one, she mused. Before she could take this thought any further, a gentle voice interrupted it.

"Couldn't sleep?"

She looked up in mild surprise, easing when she found herself staring at Harry's tall form. He was leaning casually against the stair banister,

a small grin on his face. How long had he been standing there? She hadn't even heard him come down.

She shrugged and gave him a sheepish smile.

Harry nodded and started making his way towards her. "Yeah, me either."

He sighed and sat down next to her on the window seat, relaxing against the glass. Ana still had her back to the wall, so she was now facing Harry's profile. He stared straight-ahead, and Ana watched as the fire reflected off of his glasses, smiling slightly at the sight.

"Bit of a boring day, huh?" Harry said, breaking the silence in an attempt to be funny.

It worked. Ana laughed and immediately her previous thoughts were washed away. *How does he do it*, she wondered. He always seemed to know how to lighten her spirits.

Harry turned his head to stare at her while her soft laughter echoed throughout the empty Common Room. *She's beautiful when she laughs...* The firelight gave her face a rosy glow, and her smiling eyes gleamed with the flames' reflection.

He had come down hoping that he would find her there, though not really counting on it. Whenever he couldn't seem to fall asleep he would come down here sometimes, finding the atmosphere comforting somehow. When he had descended the stairs and saw her curled up on the window seat (his favorite spot), he was pleasantly surprised. But from the way she was forlornly staring at nothing out the window, he knew she could probably do with some cheering up.

Which is why he was so glad he decided to bring the surprise with him, just in case she was down here. He fingered the now small object in his pocket, suddenly feeling nervous for some reason. He hoped she liked it.

He turned to her and noticed she was staring up at something through the window. He shifted slightly to do the same, and it was

then that he noticed the night sky for the first time since sitting down. It sparkled with hundreds of stars, which were even more bright and beautiful without the harsh light of the moon to impede on them.

He smiled, an idea forming in his head. "Hey," he said, turning to Ana suddenly and rising from the seat. "Come on, I want to show you something."

He offered her his hand, and Ana stared at it for a moment, confused. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Just...trust me. Please?"

Ana looked into his pleading eyes, and she relented. She gave him her hand, allowing him to help her off the window seat. He grinned at her and began leading her out the portrait hole and into the deserted halls.

The silence of the corridor was deafening, save for the soft tread of their footsteps. "Harry, won't we get into trouble? I don't think we're supposed to be wandering the halls in the middle of the night," she whispered apprehensively, looking around as if half-expecting a teacher to pop out of nowhere and discover them.

Harry chuckled at this and squeezed her hand comfortingly. "School hasn't started yet Ana. We're not going to get in trouble. Don't worry."

"Easy for you to say. Something tells me you're quite used to late night excursions. Am I right?" she asked with a grin.

"As a matter of fact, you are! Fancy that," he laughed and looked back at her with an evil grin that made her laugh.

They made their way up until they reached a steep, spiral staircase to what had to be the tallest tower in the castle. *What is he up to?*, she wondered. She tried working her mind to see if she could remember from her readings what was in the tallest tower, but came up with nothing. She was too curious to think clearly, anyway.

They came to a large wooden door, and Harry opened it to lead her inside. Soon they were standing on an open balcony. The summer air

wafted over them, bringing with it the sweet, dewy fragrances of the night. As her surroundings suddenly became clear to her, Ana gasped.

"The Astronomy Tower," Harry explained needlessly with a small smile.

Ana slowly walked to the parapets of the balcony in complete awe. Above her was the most beautiful sight her eyes had ever seen. The night sky was alive with the light of the stars, pulsing with beauty. What a difference it made being up here, rather than seeing it from the Common Room window. It was breathtaking. She'd never seen anything quite like it.

"Oh, Harry...it's beautiful!" she breathed, still entranced by the night sky above her.

He smiled and moved to stand beside her. He gazed up at the glittering heavens and nodded. "I thought you might like it. I've been coming up here a lot lately whenever I can't sleep. It's funny...it never fails to calm me down. Make me feel better," he said quietly, turning to face her as he did. "I figured you could use something like that after today."

Ana tore her gaze away from the stars above to look him in the eye. "Harry, about that...I...I wanted to...to thank you," she began hesitantly as she stared down at her hands. "If it wasn't for you...You saved my life. And I...I just wanted to thank you. You always seem to be there when I need you," she smiled. She lifted her head to look at him and gave a small laugh.

Harry blushed and was thankful that it was dark outside. "Yeah, well, you're pretty good at finding yourself in sticky situations, aren't you," he jested, grinning and earning another laugh from Ana.

She batted him playfully. "Shut up," she told him, still smiling.

Harry smiled at her affectionately and was suddenly reminded of the main reason he had brought her up here. Again he fingered the small item in his pocket, as if he was afraid it had somehow vanished on

the way up to the tower. But no, it was still there, and so was his slight nervousness. *Here goes...*

Ana noticed immediately that Harry seemed flustered about something. She watched in curiosity as he pulled a small object from one of his pockets and held it in his hand.

"I, uh, I got you something. I wanted to give it to you earlier, but...well, with everything that happened today...I guess I got sort of side-tracked, and there never seemed to be a good time...until now, that is," he stopped, realizing he was babbling a bit.

Ana just stared at him, slightly confused. He had gotten her something? All of a sudden she was reminded of his mysterious disappearance back in Diagon Alley, and the old woman who had handed him a bag he had dropped.

Harry took a deep breath and looked down at the object in his hand, pulling out his wand as he did. "*Engorgio*," he said.

And with that, the item suddenly grew in size until Ana finally recognized what it was.

A book. Harry had gotten her a book? But why? He'd done *way* too much for her as it was.

He stared down at the book in his hands for a moment, and then lifted his head to meet her eyes with a small smile. "I wanted it to be a surprise. I thought since you lost yours when you ran away, you might like it." He handed her the book a little unsurely, hoping she'd like it.

Ana took it in both hands and felt her heart swell when she read the title.

Hogwarts, A History

She looked down at it affectionately, running a hand over its cover. "Harry, it's wonderful..." she said, looking up at him with gratitude in her eyes.

"There's more. Open it," he told her. This was the part he was nervous about.

She furrowed her brows at him, and slowly did what he said. She opened the book and turned to the first page. There, in a golden script, were words that brought tears to her eyes.

In Loving Memory

Of

Barnaby Brighton

She read the words over and over again, imprinting them into her mind forever. A tear rolled down her cheek, but she made no move to wipe it away.

Harry watched in growing apprehension as Ana continued to stare at the words in silence. It was only when she lifted her head that he noticed she was crying.

"Oh Gods, you hate it, don't you? I didn't mean to upset you, honest. Here, I'll take it back—"

Ana, who hugged the book close to her when Harry reached for it, cut his distressed words short. "No! No, Harry, I...I don't know what to say," she told him through her tears, which were now flowing freely. She sniffed. "It's...it's the most beautiful gift anyone could have ever given me," she whispered.

Harry felt his heart warm at her genuine words, but before he could respond, he felt himself thrown back a bit as Ana rushed forward into his arms. He was surprised, but he welcomed the embrace and wrapped his arms tightly around her, smiling.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I love it. More than anything."

"I'm glad," he replied, still smiling. "And you're welcome."

Slowly, she stepped back from him, clutching the book close to her. Her eyes shone with warmth as they stared into his, the starlight

bathing them both in its soft glow. She wanted to remember this moment for the rest of her life, so perfect was it.

He was perfect.

They sat there together on the tower for some time after that, pointing out each shooting star that shot across the sky above. Every now and then, Ana would look over at Harry as if she expected him to vanish any moment, and she would wake up to find that the past few days had been a dream and nothing more. But he was still there each time she did.

He was always there. And a small part of her wished secretly that he always would be.

She watched as a grin spread across his face as he excitedly pointed out another falling star to her. She grinned, too...though it had nothing to do with the heavens above.

Perfect.

[illegible]

AN: Yay! Here it is. And no terrible cliffie this time! I'm trying to redeem myself :). So what'd you think? I hope you liked this chapter, and I just want to say thank you to all my reviewers! You guys brighten my days, seriously. Your comments inspire me. Thanks again everyone and have a great day!

Chapter 11

The next day marked the beginning of Ana's education, and she awoke that morning with a stretch and a smile. Her thoughts immediately returned to the night before and her visit to the Astronomy Tower with Harry. She turned her head to the side to look at the impossibly thick book now sitting on her nightstand and smiled even more, if that were possible.

She was in a *very* good mood today.

She got up and got ready, excited to get started with all of the catching up she had to do. She had missed out on so much, and books could only take a person so far. She needed to actually practice magic to *really* learn it, and she couldn't wait.

Ana grabbed her wand, a quill, and some parchment and headed downstairs to the Common Room. She was supposed to report to Dumbledore's office, where she would meet her tutor and begin her lessons. The room was bright with the morning's sunshine that came streaming through the windows, giving it a light, airy feel.

To her surprise, Harry sat on one of the armchairs waiting for her. At her entrance, he stood and smiled.

"Morning," he said.

Ana hesitated for just a second, pleasantly surprised. She didn't think she'd get to see him this morning. "Morning," she smiled.

"I thought I'd walk you to Dumbledore's office. I figured you probably wouldn't remember where it was anyway...right?" he grinned.

Ana opened her mouth, and then closed it again, thinking. Come to think of it, she couldn't really remember exactly where it was. She felt her face redden slightly as she realized that he was right. "Oh yeah," she laughed, slightly embarrassed. "I guess I should have been paying more attention yesterday."

Harry laughed and moved towards her. "Come on. I'll take you."

They stepped out of the portrait hole and began making their way towards the Headmaster's Office. Ana was studying her surroundings intently, trying to memorize them for future reference. When they reached the gargoyle statue marking the entrance to his office, Harry said the password, and they both watched as the stairs came into view.

"Well, here you go," Harry said as he turned to her.

Ana looked around and grinned. "I would've found it eventually," she said, trying to sound confident.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, and then I would have found you wandering the halls on the opposite side of the castle."

Ana laughed too. "You're probably right. But thanks for showing me."

"You're welcome. And hey, meet me outside the front entrance doors when you're done, all right? I want to show you something," he grinned mysteriously. Before Ana had a chance to ask him what that 'something' was, however, he bid her good luck and turned, disappearing down the hallway.

She just laughed to herself quietly, shaking her head as she climbed the stairs to Dumbledore's office. She reached the large door and took a deep breath before entering.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, but smiled and rose as Ana entered.

"Ah, Ms. Brighton, right on time. May I introduce you to Professor Shrubblock?"

Dumbledore waved his arm toward an elderly gentleman who had just now risen from one of the chairs in front of the desk. He was a rather short, funny-looking fellow with a stout figure, ruddy complexion, and thin, flyaway, gray hair. He stood erect in a somewhat aloof manner and gave Ana a curt nod without ever really looking at her.

Ana gave him a small smile nonetheless, and Dumbledore spoke once again. "I have asked Professor Shrubblock to come out of

retirement for a short while so that he may teach you. He is an expert in most studies of magic, having dedicated his life to it and has written countless books on the subject. In other words, he is more than qualified to be teaching you the basics that you'll need to know. Is there anything I've forgotten, Sebastian?"

The man turned towards Dumbledore (Ana couldn't help noticing he didn't quite meet his eyes, either) and said, "No. I think that will be all, Albus." His voice was high and slightly wheezy.

"Very well," Dumbledore said. "Professor Shrublock will show you to the classroom you'll be using, Ana. Follow him. Best of luck with your studies, though I'm sure you won't need it," he grinned and winked at her.

"Thank you, Professor," she smiled.

With that, Professor Shrublock moved past her out the door, and she followed dutifully. He led her down the hall until they came to an empty classroom.

The room was empty save for a few desks, a dusty bookshelf, and a blank chalkboard. Professor Shrublock walked in as if it were the most comfortable thing in the world. He immediately began conjuring up several books and set them on a desk near the front. He then turned his attention to the board where what appeared to be several spells were being written rapidly.

Ana sat down at the desk with the books and waited patiently. When he began speaking, it was with an aloof, almost bored, air. Ana quickly took out a quill and parchment and wrote his words down.

Professor Shrublock paced back and forth slowly as he began explaining some simple spells. His hands remained clasped behind his back, and he never seemed to take his eyes off the ceiling. *It's a wonder he doesn't trip over his feet*, Ana thought to herself as she watched him.

He also had the funniest habit of wriggling his nose every few moments, making him greatly resemble a chipmunk. Ana felt the

strongest urge to giggle every time he would do this, but she held it in. Somehow she had a feeling he wouldn't be too keen with that.

The lesson seemed to drag on, and Ana's progress was slow going. Shrublock had her perform a few spells with her wand, and it was taking her a while to get used to the concentration that was needed. Needless to say, there were a few mishaps...

Shrublock, however, remained his lackadaisical self and was very patient with her. Her lesson lasted a few hours, and she wasn't much better off at the end of it. But, it was only her first lesson, she told herself, and she was determined to practice her heart out until she got it right.

By the time they were done, she was exhausted. She had no idea that magic could be so draining. But with a jolt of excitement, she remembered that she was supposed to meet Harry outside.

Her tiredness forgotten, she made her way down the castle until she arrived at the ground floor. From there, it wasn't difficult to find the great oak entrance doors. She pushed through them into the afternoon sunlight, shielding her eyes from the brightness. It was a big change from the dark, dusky corridors of the castle. She slowly made her way down the stone steps and looked around curiously.

No Harry.

Where was he? She was in the right place, right? All she could see before her was the green expanse of lawn leading down to the shimmering lake. Everything was quiet and still. The only sound to be heard was the gentle breeze as it passed by her to dance with the trees.

Then, with a suddenness that scared the living daylights out of her, she felt a *whoosh* sweep just above her head. Harry came into view almost immediately, swooping down on a broom and landing directly in front of her. He dismounted and stood there, looking at her with a big grin on his face.

"Hello," he said simply, as though nothing had happened.

Ana's hand was clutched to her chest as she looked at him in disbelief. "Merlin...Harry you scared the hell out of me!"

Harry's grin widened. "Sorry 'bout that," he said, not looking sorry at all.

Ana glowered at him, but a grin soon crept across her face as well. "Yeah right."

Harry just laughed and took her arm as they began walking. Harry opened his mouth, about to ask her how her lesson went, when he noticed something in Ana's hair. Confused, he reached up and pulled it out, looking at it. Ana turned her head to look at it too and groaned when she saw what it was. A small, torn piece of paper was held in his hands.

Amused, Harry asked, "Care to explain?"

Ana sighed and answered him reluctantly. "I, uh, I sort of made one of the lesson books explode when I was trying to levitate it..." she mumbled, reddening slightly. "There was paper everywhere."

Harry howled with laughter at this, holding his sides from the effort. Ana hit him in the shoulder, trying to look angry. "It's not funny, Harry!" But try as she might, she couldn't help the laughter that bubbled up from within her from escaping. Now that she thought about it, it was pretty funny, actually...Professor Shrublock had been covered in bits of white paper, and he still had looked as though he had not a care in the world.

Harry's laughs subsided, and he looked at her, smiling. "Don't worry, Ana. Stuff like that's bound to happen on your first tries. You should've seen some of the stuff that happened to me my first couple of years," he paused, thinking. "Actually it still happens every now and then, come to think of it."

"Really?" Ana asked hopefully, feeling slightly better.

Harry laughed again and nodded. "What's your Professor like?"

Ana then began telling him all about Professor Shrubblock and his funny little habits, smiling as she did so. He wasn't so bad...just perhaps a bit odd. When Ana finished, she looked up and found that they were now standing in the middle of the Quidditch field. She looked around, puzzled, but before Ana could ask what they were doing there, Harry stopped and turned to her.

"So, you up for another lesson today? You won't make anything explode. I promise," he grinned, holding the broom up in way of explanation.

Ana looked at the broom, then back at Harry's expectant face. "What?" she asked, confused.

"Flying," he said. "You said you wondered what it was like, so I'm going to teach you," he smiled at her, looking excited.

"Now? I mean...just like that?" Ana asked nervously, staring at the broom dubiously. She wanted to learn, but after seeing Harry speed by her like a bat out of hell on it, she was having some doubts.

Harry saw her apprehension and smiled. "It's not gonna bite, Ana. It's easy. C'mere..."

He reached out for her hand and pulled her closer, handing her the broom. She held it in her hands and tested its weight. It suddenly seemed very unlikely that flying in the air on this thing would be even remotely safe.

"Okay, now get on," Harry told her. She obeyed hesitantly. "Now, I want you to kick off, but stay low to the ground, alright? Don't worry, I've got you..." He held her arm supportively as she took a deep breath and did as he said, gripping the handle tightly.

As she did, she felt herself rise immediately and nearly panicked when her feet no longer touched the ground. She clamped her eyes shut and gasped, seriously thinking for a moment that she was going to die due to a broom accident. She heard Harry's laughter and became aware that he was still holding her arm.

"Ana, open your eyes."

Slowly, she did as he said and almost laughed with relief and embarrassment. She was about two feet off the ground, and she realized she probably could have even touched the earth with her feet if she straightened them.

“See?” Harry grinned. “Not so bad, right?”

Ana smiled, still getting used to the odd feeling that floating in the air brought her. “No. Not so bad,” she said.

“Okay, now we’re gonna move forward a little bit. Slowly, alright?” He gave her a gentle push but never took his hand from her arm. “That’s it...lean forward. The important thing is balance,” he told her, walking forward with her as she moved.

Ana laughed. She was moving! Okay, so maybe it was only inches at a time, but she was definitely moving. “I’m flying...” she said joyously, teetering slightly. Harry smiled proudly and gripped her arm so she wouldn’t fall.

After a while, when Harry was sure she had gotten used to keeping the balance that was needed, he surreptitiously moved his hand away from her. He watched her carefully as she floated forward, oblivious to the fact that Harry was no longer assisting her. He kept close, ready to jump into action if she needed him, but Ana was doing just fine on her own. She was beaming, in fact.

“Now you’re flying,” he said to her grinning.

Ana looked back and was slightly shocked to see Harry standing a few feet away from her. She was on her own. Flying. She felt a little twinge of panic, but it dissipated instantly when Harry smiled reassuringly at her.

“You’ve got it, Ana. I told you it wasn’t hard,” he said, crossing his arms.

She laughed. “Yeah...it isn’t so bad.”

"You wanna go for a *real* ride now?" he asked with a grin as he walked towards her. Ana's smile faltered. She didn't like the look on his face right now.

"Uh...I don't know, Harry. I don't thi—" She was cut off as Harry jumped on the broom in front of her.

"Hold on," he said, excited.

"What!" But before she could understand his true meaning, she felt a lurch as the broom shot upwards.

"*Harry!*" she screeched, locking her arms around his torso as they rose higher and higher. "Oh Gods...I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die," she whispered over and over, shutting her eyes once again and burying her head into Harry's back.

She heard Harry's soft laughter over the rush of wind. "You're not going to die, Ana. Look," he told her.

Ana realized they had stopped moving and lifted her head, opening her eyes slowly. The sight before her left her completely speechless.

They hovered high above the ground over the Quidditch pitch, making visible the sprawling expanse of Hogwarts and its grounds. The castle rose majestically towards the sun, the green fields and hills rolled downwards towards the broad, glittering lake, and the trees stretched onwards for miles and miles and miles. She could see everything from up here. Everything...

"Whoa..." she breathed, finally.

"Yeah..." Harry said, grinning. He'd done this a million times before, but the sight never failed to amaze him. He came out of his trance and shifted until he could see Ana's face. "So...would you like to get the unofficial tour of Hogwarts now? The one hardly anyone ever gets to see?" he asked her with a bright smile.

Ana took one look at that smile and realized he could have asked her anything at that moment and she would have agreed to it. With a

simple nod of her head, they were off, soaring through the air as the world spanned beneath them.

They circled the castle, whooshing past its towers with ease. Ana laughed and screamed as Harry maneuvered the broom, dipping and turning with impressive skill and grace. She held on tight and marveled at the views this height provided. Harry had been right. She felt a sense of freedom and wonder as she had never felt before as they moved to soar over the lake. It was breathtaking.

Harry, too, was quite overcome, but it had nothing to do with the beautiful sights below him. He could hear Ana's laughter behind him, her 'ooh's' and 'aah's' as they flew over Hogwarts. She would point to things, gasp, and say 'look,' and he would, even though he knew these surroundings by heart. But it was like seeing everything for the first time all over again when he was with her. Because of the life she had led, every little thing was beautiful and new. He was proud to be the one who showed her all this.

He also couldn't quite take his mind off the fact that her arms were around him. She held him close, perhaps a bit too tightly, but he didn't mind. She was probably still a little afraid. Course this wasn't your average first broom ride either, he supposed.

Too soon, it seemed, they descended back to the field. Harry landed gently and dismounted, helping Ana off as he did so. Her legs felt wobbly when they were finally planted firmly once again on the ground. She wasn't sure if it was due to their dangling in the air for so long, or the fact that she could still feel how good it felt to have her arms around Harry.

"You okay?" he asked her once they were both standing.

I'm more than okay... she thought inwardly, but nodded to Harry. "That was amazing..." she breathed, still a little awestruck.

Harry smiled, and they both began to make their way back to the castle as the sun slowly sank, casting them both in its dusky glow. Ana smiled too, feeling suddenly higher than any broom could ever take her...

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She was flying...Her arms stretched outwards into the starry night, and she was soaring higher, higher, higher...It was the most wonderful feeling in the world...she felt like she could do anything...But then, without warning, the world turned on its end, and she was falling fast. The ground seemed to rise up to meet her...she closed her eyes, waiting for the impact...but instead found herself standing on the Hogwarts grounds, as though nothing had happened.

But something was wrong...the air was ice cold around her. She could see her breath coming out in gasps...she felt afraid without knowing why. But as she turned to the forest, the reason became clear. A man in a hooded cloak had emerged...he was coming towards her slowly...she couldn't move! Her feet felt as though they were glued to the earth beneath her. She could only watch as he drew nearer...wand outstretched.

He seemed to appear before her in an instant...she was being dragged towards the trees...No! He was going to take her in there...she would die in there...She pulled and planted her feet, but it didn't matter...he was too strong...she wanted to scream for help, but no sound came out...the wall of trees swallowed them up...they moved deeper and deeper into the darkness...she could barely see a thing...the forest seemed to close in on her...she couldn't breathe...she couldn't breathe...

"NO!"

Ana shot up from her bed, gasping for air and sucking it in greedily. She looked around in confusion and breathed a sigh of relief as the sight of her dorm room met her eyes. It was just a dream...

She wiped her forehead, which was covered in a cold sweat, and tried to slow her still thundering heart. It had seemed so...*real*.

She quickly got up and got ready, needing to preoccupy her mind with something else. She only realized she was still trembling when she went to retrieve her quill for her lesson today.

Just a dream...

When she was done, she descended the stairs to meet Harry, who awaited her in the Common Room, ready to walk her to her classroom. She forced a smile as she neared him.

"Morning," she said, a lilt of emotion creeping its way into it. *Damn...*

Harry frowned, knowing almost immediately that something was wrong. Even if she hadn't said anything he would've known that. She was much paler than usual, and her eyes, expressive as they were, seemed troubled. Fearful.

"What's wrong?" he asked without a second thought, his concern audible in his voice.

Ana turned her face away, trying to appear as though she were completely fine. "Nothing..."

"Ana..." Harry said firmly. "C'mon, what is it?"

She sighed. She might as well tell him. "I just...had a bad dream, is all."

"You wanna talk about it?" he asked her softly, trying to meet her eyes, which were currently glued to the floor. He had had more nightmares than he could count, so he knew what she was feeling right now.

Ana lifted her head and gave him a small smile. "No. It's okay. It was silly, anyway."

Harry stared at her for a moment, trying to deduce whether or not he should press her further. "You sure?" he finally asked.

"Yeah. I'd rather just forget about it," she said assuredly.

"Okay. But you know if you ever want to talk..." he trailed off meaningfully, and Ana nodded.

"I know."

“Right,” he said, smiling at her. “Well, let’s be off, then.”

She nodded her agreement and once again followed him out of the Common Room. He bid her farewell at her classroom door, and they agreed to meet again afterwards. Harry then began making his way to the empty classroom where Sirius was waiting.

They greeted each other happily and said a few words before getting on with the lesson. Though it was hardly what one would call a ‘lesson.’ Harry had by now already learned everything Sirius could teach him. They battled each other fiercely...a perfect match. Harry had reached a skill that would impress even the best of swordsmen. The hours upon hours of unrelenting practice had really paid off.

“Very well done, Harry,” Sirius said when they were finished. Both were sweating and still trying to catch their breath after the strenuous practice.

Harry leaned against a wall and watched as Sirius began putting away the swords. The older man then turned to him with a small, slightly sad smile. “You’re ready now, you know. Makes me feel better about this being our last lesson.”

“What?” Harry said quickly, confused. *Last lesson?*

Sirius sighed. “Trust me Harry, as much as I’d like to stay and teach you, I just can’t. School begins in two days,” Sirius said with a sad look.

“Oh yeah...” Harry said, feeling foolish. That meant that the students would be arriving tomorrow. How could he have forgotten that? The week seemed to have flown by...A sadness filled him as the true meaning of this hit him. He wouldn’t be able to see Sirius every day like he had been these past few weeks. He was beginning to think they’d go on like that forever...

Sirius saw the disappointed look on his godson’s face and moved towards him, placing a strong hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right, Harry. We can still write to each other. You don’t need me here anymore,” he told him softly.

Harry looked up at him. "I'll always need you, Sirius."

Sirius gave a small smile at this, gratitude shining in his eyes. "I'm always here for you, Harry. You know that, right?"

Harry sighed and nodded. "Yeah, I know..."

Sirius nodded too. "Good. Now I want you to keep practicing whenever you can, all right? Keep at all of the moves I've shown you."

"I will," Harry said firmly.

Sirius paused and looked at the young man before him for a second, marveling at how much he had matured over the years. "I'm very proud of you, Harry," he said finally.

Harry said nothing, but looked at his godfather with a small smile. Sirius smiled then, too, and clapped him on the back as he led him towards the door.

"You stay out of trouble, all right? And keep an eye on Ana. She needs a friend now, you know..." Sirius said.

"I will," Harry said with certainty. They turned to each other as they walked out into the hallway.

"Well, I'm off," Sirius said. "Goodbye, Harry. I'll no doubt talk to you soon enough. Good luck with school and...and be careful, all right?" he said after a pause, looking at him worriedly.

Harry nodded, letting him know he would. "You too, Sirius."

The older man smiled one last time. "That's my boy. Now go fetch your lady. She's waiting for you," he said with a grin and a wink, the classic mischievous look returning to his grey eyes.

But Harry wasn't upset by this, and instead he just laughed and shook his head. Sirius would never change.

They said goodbye once more and parted ways, Harry to go and 'fetch his lady,' and Sirius to return to his dark hideout. Harry stopped at the end of the hallway and turned back to watch his godfather's departing form once more and smiled as he did. Laughing again, he turned and continued on, pondering what it would be like if Ana was indeed 'his lady.'

He was quite shocked to realize the thought wasn't nearly as unpleasant as he thought it would be. In fact, the thought was more appealing than he was willing to admit.

He brushed the thought away quickly, feeling his cheeks start to burn slightly. But as he walked down through the corridors, the image of her smiling face kept appearing in his head, and as it did, he unconsciously quickened his steps.

She was waiting for him, after all...

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The two of them spent the rest of the day outside. The sun was shining brightly and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. A perfect summer day.

They lounged by the lake underneath the branches of a sprawling tree. Ana told Harry all about her lesson and how she had only managed to explode one thing (one of the board's erasers). They laughed and talked for hours, skipping rocks and throwing the giant squid some food every now and then.

Ana was feeling much better now. Her dream had all been but forgotten, what with the concentration she had needed to focus on her lesson. There wasn't any room for dwelling on a silly dream. And now that she was out in the sunshine with Harry having a great time, thoughts of dark forests and cloaked figures seemed miles away.

They walked over to the Quidditch pitch, and Harry got his broom out so he could teach Ana how to play the sport. He showed her how to score goals with the Quaffle, and got on the broom behind her this time so she could try scoring a goal. Ana was laughing hysterically as

she held the stitched ball in her hands, feeling utterly ridiculous when she tried to toss the ball through one of the hoops. Harry guided the broom closer, and Ana continued to miss several times, but she had never had more fun.

“Harry, I’m terrible at this,” she laughed as they prepared to near the hoops again.

“You’re doing great. Just focus and keep your eye on the goal...” he told her, grinning. “Ready?” he asked. She steeled herself for the surge forward, trying to look serious and not burst out laughing again, and nodded.

They moved steadily forward, coming up fast towards the goal, and with a mighty throw, Ana sent the Quaffle hurling through the air. It sailed towards the ring, and Ana held her breath as she watched it eagerly, gasping in shock when it went right through the middle of it. Harry cheered loudly behind her.

“I did it! Harry, I got a goal!” she yelled triumphantly, pure joy written on her face.

Harry lowered them to the ground and made some crowd noises with his hands around his mouth. “She scores! 10 points to Gryffindor! Ana Brighton, champion Quidditch player! And the crowd goes wild...” He made some more crowd noises while Ana laughed at his antics, feeling very proud.

Harry ran towards her and picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder while he ran around in circles.

“Harry!” she screamed, laughing so hard her stomach hurt. “Put me down!”

They both fell to the grassy floor, still unable to control their laughter. They lay there for a long time afterwards, watching in contented silence as the sun sank beneath the trees. When it started to get dark, and the stars began coming out, they rose to head back to the castle. They walked in a comfortable silence until Harry spoke.

"This week has gone by fast, huh? It seems crazy that everyone's getting here tomorrow," he said.

Ana whipped her head towards him at this, a surprised look on her face. "Tomorrow?"

Harry gave her a small smile. "Yeah, I forgot too."

Ana stared at him for a moment, and then cast her eyes downward, deep in thought. The nervousness she had of meeting everyone came back to her in full force. She had been trying to ignore it all week and had so far been fairly successful. Until now, that is...

Harry noticed the change in her demeanor immediately and could guess what was going through her head right now. He slowed and reached out a hand to stop Ana, making her face him.

"It's going to be fine, Ana. You have nothing to be worried about," he told her softly as he lifted her chin. She stared back at him with troubled eyes.

"I know I shouldn't be...but I can't help it. What if they all hate me?" she asked.

Harry looked deep into her eyes and caressed her cheek with his thumb as he held her face in his hand. "They won't hate you," he whispered. "I don't hate you..."

All thoughts of school vanished instantly as Ana stared back into his eyes. The world seemed to still around them as she unconsciously leaned into his touch, which gave her goosebumps. They both inched forward almost imperceptibly then, Harry's face lowering to meet hers.

Ana didn't know what was happening. All she knew was that it felt right. Their lips were centimeters apart. An eternity seemed to pass. Ana waited, anticipating the contact with bated breath. But before their lips could meet, a movement out of the corner of her eye made her stop and turn.

A dark figure had just emerged from the forest...wearing a hooded cloak.

She gasped and recoiled in horror out of Harry's grasp, her eyes glued to the approaching form.

Her dream...It was just like her dream...

Startled by the sudden loss of her touch, Harry looked at her in confusion. It was only then when he, too, noticed the cloaked figure coming towards them. His wand was out in a flash, and he immediately stepped in front of Ana, tensing himself for a battle.

"Stay where you are!" he yelled towards the form, his face dark with unbridled vigor. He didn't know who this person was, but he intended to find out. And whoever the hell they were, they wouldn't get near Ana if he could help it.

He was slightly surprised when the figure actually slowed. Warily, Harry called out to the cloaked form once again. "Show yourself!"

Ana stood trembling behind Harry, watching fearfully as the now very close figure raised two hands to lower the hood. Her heart beat wildly, fearing the worst. But the removal of the hood revealed a man Ana had never seen before. So it wasn't her father...But neither had that man been in Diagon Alley. She readied herself to dodge an attack, but paused when Harry lowered his wand. He seemed to recognize the man, whoever he was.

"Mundungus?" Harry said incredulously. He could barely express what a relief it was to find it was an Order member underneath that cloak.

"Hello Harry," Mundungus said cheerfully, walking nearer as he did.

Harry furrowed his brows in confusion. His body was still tensed with readiness, and he had a hard time slowing his thundering heart. "What are you doing here? You scared us to death!"

Mundungus grinned, revealing several tobacco-stained teeth. "Sorry 'bout that. Didn't mean to frighten...both of you," he said, trying to peer around Harry's tall form to get a glimpse of Ana, who was still shielded behind Harry.

Harry noticed and turned back to Ana, moving her next to him. "It's all right, Ana. This is Mundungus Fletcher. He's an Order member," he told her gently, seeing that she was still shaken.

Upon hearing this, a surge of relief passed through Ana, though she couldn't shake the feeling of uneasiness. She forced a smile and nodded at him. "Hello."

Mundungus studied her intently, a small smile on his face. She felt decidedly uncomfortable under his searing gaze and scrunched her nose discretely when the smell of alcohol filled her nostrils. She realized it was coming from him.

Harry, too, was noticing Mundungus' odd behavior and frowned. He still hadn't told him what he was doing walking out of the Forbidden Forest in a hooded cloak. "So, did the Order send you or something?" he asked.

Mundungus snapped out of his reverie and looked up at Harry. "Oh...uh, yes. Yes, they told me to keep an eye out on the Forest in case the Carrows came around. Can never be too careful, you know..." he said, his eyes returning once again to Ana.

"Right," Harry said, looking at him curiously. He shot a glance at Ana and noticed that she seemed uncomfortable. "Well, we've got to get back to the castle..."

"Oh, of course, of course," Mundungus said quickly. "If you ever need anything, my dear, don't hesitate to ask. And don't worry, your parents *will* be caught," he told Ana, a curious glint in his eyes.

Ana didn't know what to say to this, so she simply nodded and forced yet another smile. Harry placed his hand on her lower back and started to lead her away, bidding Mundungus farewell. They walked back towards the castle, eager to be once again inside its solid walls.

Mundungus stood in the same spot and watched them go until they disappeared through the entrance doors. He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved his flask, taking a long gulp from its contents. The Firewhiskey burned down his throat, though years of heavy drinking had gotten him quite used to the sensation. With one last

look at the castle, he turned and disappeared once again into the dark and unmoving trees.

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“You all right?”

Ana looked away from the fire, where she had been staring for the past few minutes, and into Harry’s worried gaze. They both sat on the big couch in the Common Room.

She pondered the question for a moment, debating whether or not she should tell him about her dream and how frighteningly similar the scene outside had just been. *But nothing happened...It was just that Mundungus man. He’s in the Order for crying out loud*, she thought. Deciding that she had once again overreacted, she smiled at Harry.

“Yeah. I’m fine,” she said softly.

Harry continued to stare at her, saying nothing, and Ana was suddenly reminded of what had almost happened before Mundungus interrupted them.

A kiss. He had almost kissed her. She had almost kissed him!

Whoa...

She felt her cheeks redden slightly as she recalled how lost in the moment she had been. How her heart had fluttered in anticipation. How his clean, comforting scent had filled the air as their lips moved to meet each other. How she still had shivers just thinking about it...

Harry, too, couldn’t stop thinking about their almost-kiss. He didn’t know what had made him do it. All he knew was that she looked so beautiful and innocent at that moment. He merely followed his instincts. Or perhaps it had been his heart he’d been following...

He smiled at her, warmth shining in his eyes. “Well, I’ll tell you what, I think the other House teams won’t know what hit ‘em when the mean

and mighty Ana Brighton gets a hold of that Quaffle. Hoo, man, look out!" he said, a glint of humor in his eyes.

Ana laughed loudly and hit him with one of the couch pillows. "Shut up," she grinned, pulling her knees up against her and burying her face in her arm. "I'm an awful Quidditch player, and you know it," she mumbled, the grin she was sporting detectable in her voice.

"What was that? Humble now, are we?" Harry teased, digging his fingers into her sides, causing her to shriek in laughter. She tried desperately to fight him off, but she barely could get full breaths in she was laughing so hard.

"Harry stop! Stop...please!" she gasped, tears streaming down her face. Harry laughed and let up finally, but only because he was concerned that Ana would die from laughing too hard, if that were possible.

They lapsed into a peaceful silence, a chuckle escaping every now and then from Ana's lips. Harry closed his eyes briefly, wanting to savor this moment. Tomorrow, he knew the halls would once again be filled with the chaos of returning students. He would no longer have these quiet moments alone with Ana. He hoped things would remain the same. That things would go smoothly once school started, and he introduced her to his friends.

Little did he know how wrong he would be...

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AN: I'm SO sorry for the wait! This chapter just did NOT want to come out of me...I had to fight with it, and I'm still sort of uncertain about the results, so sorry if its not up to par. But I couldn't keep you guys waiting any longer! My reviewers are so awesome. I really appreciate any comments you're willing to give, so if you're reading this story, let me know what you think! Thanks again for taking the time to read and, as always, have a great day!

Chapter 12

Ana awoke the next morning to the sound of rain spattering lightly against her window and smiled at the sound. She'd almost forgotten how much she liked the rain. Plus, her dreams had been nightmare free, unlike the previous night. *Thank Merlin*, she thought.

But the smile was quickly wiped from her face when she was reminded of what day it was. Everyone would be arriving later that night.

"Oh Gods..." she moaned, throwing the covers over her head. Maybe if she just hid the rest of the day...

She sighed. No, she couldn't do that. She needed to face this. After all, she'd been through *much* worse before. She could handle a little thing like meeting her fellow students...right?

She would have to, she realized. And besides, she had her lesson to get to, so she rose from the bed to get ready and face the day. Harry was once again waiting for her in the Common Room. They said good morning to each other and walked out of the portrait hole and into the halls.

"So, do you think Professor...er, Bushlock—"

"*Shrublock*, Harry," Ana corrected.

"Right. Anyway, do you think he'd mind if I sat in on your lesson with you?" Harry asked.

Ana turned to him curiously. "Um...I don't think he'd mind, no. Why, though? I thought you were supposed to have practice with Sirius?"

"Yesterday was my last practice with him. It wouldn't be safe for him to stay until today. You know, since everyone's arriving later, and I imagine the rest of the teacher's are here by now," he explained, keeping his voice low.

“Oh,” Ana said nodding. She’d almost forgotten that Harry’s godfather was supposed to be in hiding. “That must be very hard for him,” she added softly as they walked on.

Harry put his hands in his pockets and looked down towards the floor. “Yeah. I know it kills him to have to stay there all the time, but he never ever mentions it. This place will feel kind of empty without him once school starts,” he said, and his eyes turned sad for a moment.

In an attempt to cheer him up, Ana nudged Harry playfully with her shoulder. “Well I guess it’s a good thing you got me then, huh?” she said jokingly.

Harry grinned at her, the warmth returning to his green eyes. “Sure is, Ana.”

He wasn’t joking in the slightest.

Ana blushed and turned away, trying to hide the pleased smile that came to her face. At that moment, they came upon the classroom, and Harry let Ana go in before him. Professor Shrublock had his back to them and was currently tapping the blackboard with his wand, whereupon various potions and their ingredients were being scrawled.

The older man turned around as he heard the sound of their entrance, and Ana brought Harry forward. “Professor Shrublock, this is Harry. He’s going to sit in on the lesson, if that’s all right.”

Harry smiled and stuck out his hand. “Good to meet you Professor Shrubbery—oof!” Ana had elbowed him in the stomach and turned her head away whispering “*Shrublock!*” Harry grinned embarrassedly and said quickly, “Er, Shrublock. Professor Shrublock...sorry.”

Professor Shrublock simply peered at him in his aloof manner and wriggled his nose. Harry was desperately trying not to laugh, finding the situation very funny, and Ana was trying to hide her embarrassment.

Professor Shrublock said nothing, only giving a curt nod and motioning with his arm for Harry to take a seat in one of the chairs against the wall. He did, still trying to keep the grin from his face, and

Ana took her usual seat at the desk. Shrublock wasted no time in jumping right into the lesson, pacing and staring up at the ceiling as he always did.

Ana was trying to concentrate and take notes as usual, but she was finding it increasingly difficult due to a certain distracting someone. Harry would imitate the Professor's facial expressions whenever he wasn't looking and would wriggle his nose, though in a highly exaggerated manner. Ana clamped her mouth shut and turned away, wanting to laugh so bad that her eyes were watering from the effort of trying to hold it in.

This went on for the rest of lesson, with Harry finding numerous ways to amuse Ana. He made funny faces at her, pretended to fall asleep, levitated her quill when she wasn't using it and floated it in front of her face. She snatched it out of the air before Professor Shrublock could see and gave Harry the death stare, though still desperately trying not to burst with laughter. He just grinned at her innocently.

Each time he stepped his antics up a notch, trying to get Ana to break, but she did a fantastic job at keeping under control. However, the potion she had been making suffered the consequences of her lack of full attention and started smoking wildly when she was only halfway done with it. With a wave of his wand, Shrublock put a stop to the smoking, however, which was a very large relief to Ana because she was certain it would have exploded otherwise.

Harry was laughing silently in his chair by the wall, and Ana was turning slightly pink. Soon after that, she was dismissed (unsurprisingly), and Harry followed her out into the hallway. The minute the door closed behind them, Ana gave Harry a punch to the shoulder.

"Ow!" he said, rubbing the spot with a wince. "What was that for?"

Ana looked at him reproachfully. "You know *exactly* what that was for, Harry. I can't believe you!" She was trying very hard to look angry, but for some reason, all the laughter that she had been trying to hold in for the past two hours suddenly came bursting forth.

Harry grinned. "Who me? I don't know what you're talking about..."

Ana scoffed and shook her head, grinning in disbelief. "Never again. You are never, ever, ever, ever, EVER, coming to my lessons again." She placed a hand over her face as she thought back to it. "Gods, Professor Shrublock must think I'm insane."

Harry laughed heartily and playfully threw an arm around her shoulders. "Insane? You? Nah, if anyone's daft in that room it's Shrubbery," Harry said, wriggling his nose at her in way of explanation.

"Harry!" she laughed, swatting his chest with her arm, which Harry tried to dodge unsuccessfully. "It's Shrublock. And he's not insane. He's just a little...different, is all," she said with a nod, though even she sounded as though she wasn't entirely convinced of that.

Harry rubbed the spot on his chest where she had hit him with a grimace. "Alright, I'll stop. I'm gonna look like I got into a fight with a bludger soon," he joked. Ana laughed, knowing that he probably barely felt either of her blows and was just saying so to make her smile. It worked, as usual.

They walked back to the Common Room, and Ana immediately moved to a table near the window and set down all of her stuff onto it. She sat down and got out a book, some parchment, and a quill.

Harry looked at her curiously. "What are you doing?"

Ana looked up, seeming surprised by the question. "Homework," she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Harry made a face. "Well, that's no fun." He made his way over to the window seat and sat down dejectedly, staring out over the grounds. It was still raining, making the visibility very low. Dark grey clouds rolled over the castle and the rain spattered the window lightly. *Damn*, he thought. He was aching to ride his broom again.

Ana watched him for a moment, smiling at his disgruntled appearance. *Gods, he's even cute when he's pouting.* She sighed, biting her lip and looked back down at her empty piece of parchment. Then, coming to a decision, she turned yet again to Harry.

"All right," she said in a conceding manner, shutting her book as she did. "What are we doing today?"

Harry looked up from his spot at the window, a bright smile springing to his face. "Knew you'd come to your senses."

Ana laughed and watched as Harry got up and ran upstairs to his room, telling her to wait a moment. Seconds later, he reappeared, a pack of cards in his hands. He brought them over to Ana's table and sat down across from her.

"Exploding Snap," he explained to her quizzical look. "You up for it?" he asked with a grin.

"I swear, Harry, you're going to have me failing school before I even begin," she said, looking longingly at her books.

Harry's grin grew wider and a mischievous glint could be seen in his eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't aware you needed help with that."

Ana's mouth hung open in shock and grabbing one of the pillows from the nearby window seat, she hit Harry over the head with it, laughing. "You're such a git! I can't believe you said that!"

Harry just laughed and righted his glasses, which had been thrown askew from the pillow to his head. Ana looked sullen and crossed her arms, sitting back in her chair with a slight slouch. "As I recall, I was doing quite well with my potion before you had to...be your stupid self," she said, a grin finding its way across her lips.

"My stupid self, huh? That's pretty good. I gotta write that one down," he said, making a show of checking himself for a quill.

"Shut up," Ana laughed, shaking her head. She made a mental note to brush up on her insults. Definitely needed some work...

Harry laughed and starting explaining to her how to play. They spent the rest of the afternoon laughing and having a great time trying to best each other at the game, though Harry was admittedly much better at it than Ana. Plus, he didn't shriek in surprised laughter every time a card exploded, but Ana was having fun anyways.

But as the room grew darker and darker, signifying the passing time, Ana was growing increasingly more nervous. Night had almost fallen. That meant the students would be arriving soon. She tried to hide her apprehension, but Harry noticed. It wasn't that hard, actually, seeing as how Ana was gripping her cards so tightly her knuckles shone white.

"Ana."

Ana glanced up from the table where she had been staring blankly for the past couple of minutes. Harry was looking at her, concern in his eyes.

"Hmm?" she said, coming out of her daze.

"Those cards aren't going to fly away, if that's what you're worried about."

She looked down, confused, and only then noticed her death grip. Embarrassed, she put them down on the table and immediately folded her hands in her lap, where she wrung them together nervously. She tried to laugh it off, but the sound seemed hollow and forced even to her ears.

"Am I so easy to see through?" she said softly, smiling, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. It was what she feared the most at the moment.

"Ana..." he whispered, leaning forward. "Do you remember what I told you? About how it doesn't matter?"

She raised her eyes to meet his and slowly nodded. She did remember. He'd given her strength, then. Strength she should still have, right?

Harry stared at her for a moment, and then gave her a small reassuring smile. "You're gonna be fine, Ana."

As if on cue, the clock struck the hour that the students usually arrive, and Harry and Ana both turned their heads towards the sound.

“We should change into our robes,” he said quietly. Ana nodded and rose. They went to their separate rooms, changing quickly before returning once again to the quiet common room.

Harry turned to her at the foot of the stairs. “You ready?” he asked.

Ana took a deep breath and finally nodded, feeling slightly nauseous all of a sudden. *As ready as I’m going to be...*

They both moved forward, abandoning the room where they had been laughing and having a great time not long before. Ana followed Harry out of the portrait hole, and they both began to make their way down to the Great Hall where the beginning year feast would commence.

Ana was taking deep breaths and trying to calm her thundering heart, which was steadily beating faster and faster the closer they got to the ground floor. *It’s okay. Harry’s right. Just be yourself, and it will be fine. It’s okay...*

Harry glanced over at her, seeing that she was biting her lip worriedly. He reached out for her hand and grasped it tightly, giving her a comforting smile. “It’s going to be fine, Ana,” he told her softly.

But as Harry turned his face forward yet again, he felt a stirring of nervousness in the pit of his own stomach. He’d already made the decision to inform Ron and Hermione about who Ana really was. They were his best mates, and they were sure to find out sooner or later seeing as how Ana was his friend too now. They were going to like her...right? He had no doubt that they would have no problems with Ana before he told them her story...but would they still feel the same after?

Course they will, he thought. But why did it sound as though he were trying to convince himself?

His train of thought was broken immediately when they heard the milling of the students as they all made their way into the entrance hall from outside. Harry gave Ana’s hand one last squeeze before they began making their way down the final staircase, and suddenly the mass of students in their school robes came into view.

Ana hesitated for only a moment before climbing down the stairs and stepping onto the ground floor with Harry at her side. There were so many people! The two of them blended in easily into the crowd, joining the ranks of students as they bustled through the doors. The air was alive with the sound of chattering, mostly of people catching up with their friends about what they did over the summer. Ana caught snatches of 'good to see you's' and happy exclamations of friends reuniting once again.

Because of everyone's excitement over this, no one seemed to notice Ana, which she was grateful for. She stayed close to Harry, afraid that she'd lose him somehow in the mass of people. Some people spotted Harry and gave him a wave and said hello as they passed, smiling. He returned the greetings, but he seemed too preoccupied to really pay much attention. He was looking over everyone's heads as though he was searching for someone in particular, but his search was cut short when a loud voice was heard over the crowd.

"Harry!"

Ana caught a flash of bushy, brown hair coming towards them quickly through the crowd before a girl threw herself at Harry, hugging him warmly.

"Mione!" he laughed, hugging her tightly before releasing her to look at a tall, red-haired boy that had also just hurried over. "Hey Ron," he grinned, embracing him as well.

"Great wizards, I can't tell you how good it is to see you, mate!" Ron said with a happy smile. The smile was quickly replaced with a serious look, however, as he discretely moved closer to Harry so that only he could hear. "'Mione's been driving me mad all summer. She made me do all my homework the first week! Can you believe it?" he whispered, looking scandalized.

Harry laughed. Yes, yes he could believe it, all right.

Hermione, however, heard this exchange and whacked Ron over the head. "Ron! It was for your own good, you know. If you hadn't done your homework so soon, then we would have had less time to do *other things*," she told him firmly with a knowing smile.

Ron face matched the color of his hair as she said this, and he shot an embarrassed grin at Harry before turning back to Hermione. "Er, yeah, I guess you're right," he said finally.

Harry raised his eyebrows in an amused fashion at Ron and laughed. "Other things, eh? My, you two have been busy this summer, haven't you?" he jested, receiving a murderous glare from Ron.

"Shut up," he mumbled, now thoroughly mortified.

Hermione sighed and threw an exasperated look at Ron. "Honestly Ron, if you're going to turn into a beet every time I mention our relationship you're going to have a really rough time of things," she said.

Ron looked affronted at this. "Well, sorry if I still have a hard time believing I could actually be so lucky as to *have* a relationship with you, 'Mione," he said.

The ice seemed to melt around Hermione as he said this, and she beamed at him. "Oh, Ron, that's really sweet..."

Ron grinned abashedly and Harry laughed yet again. "Nice save, Ron," he said.

"It was pretty good, wasn't it?" Ron said jokingly with a triumphant look.

Hermione just sighed and shook her head, turning back towards Harry with a smile. "So, how was your summer, Harry? Did you get our presents? And what about Sirius? Is he all right?" she whispered hurriedly.

"Geez, 'Mione, one thing at a time. Let the poor man speak," Ron told her, though he, too, looked very interested in hearing what Harry had to say.

Harry chuckled and was about to respond when he suddenly remembered Ana. She had been standing back behind Harry the entire time the three had been talking, not wanting to get in the way of

the catching up they were doing. Now though, Harry grabbed her arm and gently pulled her up next to him.

“Guys, this is Ana. She’s new here,” he told them while giving Ana a smile. Hermione and Ron both seemed very surprised at the sudden appearance of the girl, and even more surprised when Harry seemed to know her. “Ana,” he continued. “This is Hermione and Ron.”

Ana smiled at them, trying to hide how nervous she was, and said, “It’s really nice to meet both of you. Harry’s told me all about you,” she said in a small voice, but it was nothing compared to how small she felt under both of their penetrating stares.

Ron was the first to snap out of it and held out his hand for her to shake. “Nice to meet you too, Ana. Glad to see Harry hasn’t forgotten about us over the summer,” he said, grinning politely at her. He couldn’t help throwing a quizzical glance in Harry’s direction, however. Harry mouthed the word *‘later’* to him in reply.

Unlike Ron, Hermione chose to stare curiously at Ana instead of offering the girl her hand. “New student? Are you a transfer, then?” she asked, her brows furrowing in confusion. Even if she was a transfer, how did Harry seem to be so familiar with her? Shouldn’t she have arrived with the rest of the students?

Ana fidgeted slightly before answering. “Er, no. I was home schooled,” she said simply, hoping it would be an acceptable answer.

Hermione, however, seemed even more puzzled by this, and Harry could tell she was about to grill Ana for some more information. Quickly, he jumped into the conversation, and said, “Come on. We’re going to get bad seats if we don’t hurry. Almost everyone’s sat down already.”

It was true. The hall was nearly empty now. Only a few stragglers here and there were to be seen, and they were all hurrying into the Great Hall. Harry steered Ana in that direction, and Ron and Hermione followed. The chattering was almost deafening now as students sat at the tables and talked with their fellow housemates.

Harry led Ana to the Gryffindor table where they sat down next to each other, with Ron and Hermione taking seats across from them. They were greeted by their fellow housemates warmly, and Ana only garnered a few curious glances. She hoped that meant she was doing a good job at blending in and trying to seem insignificant. Ron and Hermione, however, both continued to stare at Ana, even more curiously now that she was sitting at their table.

“Shouldn’t you be with the first years to get sorted?” Hermione asked her from across the table, though not unkindly.

Harry looked up. “She’s already been sorted. We’ve got a new Gryffindor,” he answered, smiling kindly at Ana. She returned it and thanked him with her eyes. Hermione, however, looked as suspicious as ever, but said nothing more. Ron was too busy staring longingly at his plate to notice much else.

“Blimey, I’m starving. Where d’you reckon they’re at?” Ron said morosely as he stared towards the doors.

Hermione tore her gaze off of Ana (who was suddenly staring at her plate as though it were the most fascinating thing in the world) and turned to Ron with a look of disbelief on her face. “You had five cauldron cakes on the train! How can you be starving?” she asked incredulously.

“That was *ages* ago, ‘Mione. And cauldron cakes don’t really count as food when you’re comparing them to the feast, now do they?” Ron said as though it were obvious.

Harry watched their exchange and sighed inwardly. He’d definitely have to tell them soon. Hermione was much too clever to be fooled by Ana’s false story, and he didn’t like the idea of keeping secrets from them anyways.

He turned his head and found Ana to be still staring determinedly at her plate, trying her hardest not to be noticed. It was working fairly well, he realized. Neville was listening to Dean and Seamus talk about their summers a few seats down from them, Lavender and Parvati were giggling about something or another, and everyone else was too busy watching the front doors eagerly.

He leaned in towards Ana, then, and tried to meet her downcast eyes. "You okay?" he whispered.

She looked up, startled, but relaxed when Harry's eyes met her own. She was doing all right, she supposed. No one had accused her of being a liar yet. Harry's friends seemed a little wary of her, but that was understandable. They didn't know her yet, and they must be wondering how she seemed to be friends with Harry already. So, yes, she supposed she was okay. She opened her mouth to respond to him but was cut short by Hermione, who seemed to have become tired of arguing with Ron about food, of all things.

"Harry," she said quietly from across the table. "You haven't told us about Sirius yet. Is he okay?"

Ron too, perked up at this and looked around to make sure no one was listening. "Yeah mate, how were your lessons?" he asked eagerly. Ron had nearly been overcome with excitement and envy when Harry had told them he was to take sword-fighting classes with Sirius earlier that summer.

Harry's attention was reluctantly diverted from Ana as he turned back to his friends. "He's fine. My lessons were great. He's gone back now, though, you know, since school's started and everything."

"Well good. I think it was crazy of him to risk coming here, anyways," Hermione said firmly. They had all become quite close with Sirius over the years.

Harry looked slightly irked by this. "He came to help me, Hermione. Believe me, I wish I didn't need the stupid lessons at all, but I don't really have a choice anymore, do I?"

Hermione softened and sighed. "You're right, Harry. I'm sorry. Its just things have been so horrible lately. Have you been reading the papers? There's an attack almost every day now," she said quietly. "The Order must have their hands full."

"Course they do, 'Mione," Ron said. "You heard my dad talking the other day." Here Ron seemed to be reminded of something, and he

turned to Harry quickly. "Oi, Harry, that reminds me. Did Sirius tell you?"

Harry frowned. "Tell me what?"

But before Ron could respond, the Great Hall's doors burst open and in came Hagrid followed closely by the first years. The Hall fell silent immediately as they passed. Hagrid caught sight of Harry and the gang and gave them all a small wave, which they all (including Ana) returned with a smile.

Ana watched with great interest as the tiny first years were sorted and cheered along with the rest of the Gryffindor table every time one was accepted into their House. She felt herself relaxing a bit as this went on, and even started enjoying herself. If everyone were so welcoming to the first years, surely they'd be just as welcoming to her, right?

When the sorting was finally over, Dumbledore moved forward to give his speech. Everyone quieted instantly in order to hear him.

"Welcome students to another year at Hogwarts. We welcome the old and new with open arms," he shifted his gaze to Ana here, and she could have sworn she saw him wink, but it happened so quickly she couldn't be sure. "The old rules still apply. I'm sure I don't need to tell all of you that the Forbidden Forest is off-limits, especially in times such as these," he said with a meaningful stare, and a few whispers could be heard here and there.

"If you have any questions please refer to the prefects or your head of houses. While I could entertain you with a rather amusing tale of my summer involving my hat and a rather distempered armadillo, I am not so naïve as to fancy myself more important than your empty stomachs," he grinned, a twinkle in his eye. "With that said, let the feast begin!"

Immediately, the tables were filled with heaps of food, and everyone dug in greedily. Ana's eyes widened at the sight. She'd never seen so much food in her entire life! Ron was busy shoveling mountains of mashed potatoes onto his plate when he saw her wide-eyed look.

"Here," he said, heaping a big spoonful of Shepard's pie onto her plate. "Try this. It's the best you'll ever taste. Guarantee it," he said through a mouthful of potatoes, smiling at her.

"Thanks," she told him laughing, digging in. He was right. It was delicious. Though she knew it would be the best she'd ever had anyway, seeing as how she'd never had it before.

Harry smiled at her, and Hermione looked disgustedly at Ron as he hardly waited to swallow before shoving more food into his mouth. "Ugh, Ron," she said, suddenly losing her own appetite.

"Wha'?" he said, seeing nothing wrong with what he was doing. He swallowed then and turned back to Harry. "So anyways, mate, as I was saying. Sirius hasn't told you anything about the meetings?"

Harry felt a stirring of unease. "No...why?" he said carefully.

Ron leaned in again. "Well, I heard my dad talking to me mum a couple days ago, and they mentioned something about what the Order's been up to lately," he said quietly.

Harry swallowed. "Which is?"

"They think they've found them, Harry...the *Carrows*," he whispered significantly.

Ana nearly choked on her pumpkin juice, and Harry tried to keep his face neutral. Hermione looked at the both of them strangely before turning to Ron. "They haven't caught them, Ron, they're just looking for them," she said, turning back to Harry. "It's incredible isn't it? After all these years they suddenly turn up just like that."

"Yeah, it's weird," Ron said, a sober look coming to his face. "Seriously evil those two are. Killed loads of people, I heard."

Ana cast her eyes downward, feeling incredibly uncomfortable and suddenly wanting very much to run out of the room.

"Yeah, weird," Harry said mechanically. He was too busy staring at Ana. He grabbed her hand under the table discretely and gave her a

small smile in an attempt to comfort her. She glanced briefly at him and turned back to her food, pretending nothing was wrong, though she gripped his hand like she'd never let it go.

Suddenly, Lavender (who happened to be sitting next to Ana) introduced herself to her and engaged her in conversation. Parvati, too, seemed interested in the new girl and soon they were both listening as Ana explained what Dumbledore had told her to tell people.

Harry glanced over and was pleased to see that Lavender and Parvati were both buying it and being extremely friendly to her. This didn't go unnoticed by Hermione, and she quickly took advantage of Ana's distraction to turn to Harry once again.

"All right, Harry. Talk," she said quietly, but firmly. Ron looked up from his pudding, too.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked innocently.

Hermione frowned at him. "You know *exactly* what I mean," she said, throwing a meaningful look at Ana who was busy listening to Lavender and Parvati talk about who the cutest boys in Hogwarts were.

Harry sighed. "Listen, I'll tell you both about it later, okay? It's sort of a long story, and this isn't exactly the right place," he said carefully, making sure Ana wasn't listening.

"Fine. Later then?" Hermione said, looking like she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Harry nodded absentmindedly, inwardly dreading the conversation. They knew about the Carrows. How were they going to react when he told them that Ana was their daughter?

Ana listened, amused, as Lavender and Parvati excitedly listed all the great "catches" at Hogwarts, as they called them. She wasn't really interested in "catching" anyone, but she listened politely all the same. They were being very nice to her, after all.

“So, I see you’ve met Harry already,” Lavender said quietly, and Parvati giggled.

“Oh...um, yeah,” Ana said, not sure why they were giving her those looks.

“So what do you think?” Lavender asked eagerly.

“About what?” Ana said, confused.

Parvati giggled again. “About Harry, silly.”

Ana felt herself blushing for some reason. “Oh, he’s...nice, I guess.” She wasn’t sure what else to say.

Lavender smiled knowingly. “Nice? He’s *dreamy*.”

“And not to mention famous!” Parvati gushed.

Ana frowned slightly, but tried to hide it as Lavender and Parvati went on about Harry and how cute he was (quietly of course).

Famous? Is that all they see? He’s so much more than that... She turned to glance at Harry, who was conversing with Ron, Dean, and Seamus about Quidditch. *Much more...*

When the feast was done, everyone rose and started filing out the doors to make their way to their Common Rooms. Hermione and Ron bid a quick farewell to Harry and Ana, as they had to report for Prefect duty (Hermione giving Harry one last look that told him she hadn’t forgotten about his promise to tell them about Ana), and they disappeared up the stairs. Before Harry and Ana could begin making their way up to the Gryffindor Common Room, however, a cold voice stopped them short.

“How was your summer, Pothead? Run into any Dementors?”

Harry turned to find himself staring into the sneering face of Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle stood sniggering at the blonde boys side. Harry threw a glare at them, bristling slightly. Ana turned too, confused.

“How about you, Malfoy? Get any new tattoos lately?” Harry said darkly, throwing a brief glance at the boy’s arm.

Malfoy stiffened, and the superior grin he had been sporting was immediately wiped off his face. “I’d watch your back if I were you, Potter,” he spat. He looked as though he was going to say something more when his eyes fell on Ana for the first time. He felt a stirring of something in the back of his mind. She looked familiar, somehow...

He narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously and was just about to open his mouth to ask her who she was when Professor McGonagall quickly interrupted him by walking up to their group, much to Harry’s relief. He didn’t like the way Malfoy was looking at Ana just then...

“What’s going on here?” she said, looking around at them all. “You all should be heading back to your Common Rooms with the rest of your fellow students. This is no time for chit-chat,” she said sternly, peering over her spectacles at each of them in turn.

Malfoy said nothing, but gave Harry one last glare before turning around to descend into the dungeons where Slytherin’s Common Room was located, Crabbe and Goyle close behind.

McGonagall watched them go and turned expectantly to Harry and Ana. They got the hint and began making their way up the staircase. They walked slowly side by side in silence for a while, neither mentioning anything about the exchange that had just taken place. Ana noted that Harry still looked peeved, so she decided it was better not to ask him questions about what had just happened quite yet.

They stepped through the portrait hole after Harry gave the Fat Lady the password and into the Common Room. Most of the students had gone to bed it seemed. There were a couple of fourth years sitting at a table in a corner playing Exploding Snap, and two first year girls were sitting on the couch in front of the fire chatting excitedly to one another. When they caught sight of Harry, however, their conversation halted immediately, as they were too busy staring to do much else.

Harry took no notice of this, or perhaps he did and chose to ignore it, and turned to Ana. “You tired?” he asked.

“Not really...” she replied. She supposed she should be, but what with all the excitement today, sleeping was the last thing on her mind right now.

“Good, me either,” Harry said, grabbing her hand as he led her to the window seat where they had sat together once before. He sat down with a sigh and closed his eyes, and Ana took a seat next to him. The two first year girls were watching them closely, she noticed and were now whispering quietly to each other.

“Ignore them,” he said softly, surprising her. She looked over at him and saw that his eyes were still closed. *So he had noticed...*

“You have quite a fan club around here,” Ana said, staring at the fire with a small smile.

Harry opened his eyes and grimaced. “Don’t remind me,” he groaned.

Ana laughed and absentmindedly began picking at the hem of her robes. “Lavender and Parvati told me you were at the top of everyone’s list,” she said teasingly with a grin.

Harry turned his head to glare at her. “Remind me never to let you hang around with them again, all right?”

Ana chuckled. “What? They were being very nice to me. And now I have some very valuable information about who the cutest boys in our year are,” she joked.

Harry, however, thought she was being serious and was surprised to feel a stirring of...jealousy? No, that can’t be right. But then why did the idea of Ana with another guy from their year make him want to kick something?

He frowned and shifted uneasily in his seat. Ana hadn’t noticed his reaction to what she had just said, however. She watched as the two first year girl’s finally gave up on their staring and made their way up to their rooms. The fourth years in the corner followed soon after, the faint smell of smoke still hanging in the air from their game.

It was just the two of them now, and the silence of the common room hung heavily over them both. Harry was still frowning as he gazed unseeingly into the fire, and Ana had turned her head to study the dark night outside the window. It had stopped raining, but the night sky was still black with clouds, hiding the stars from view.

Ana felt a little like those stars at the moment. Pushed into the background, quiet and unnoticed. But that was what she had wanted, wasn't it? She hadn't wanted people to notice her, fearing they'd become suspicious of her story. But Lavender and Parvati seemed to buy it, and they had been pretty nice to her, even *if* the subject matter of their conversation hadn't exactly been up Ana's alley.

And Harry's friends...well that was a different story. She could tell that they were wary of her...especially Hermione.

Ana could see how close Harry was with them, so it made sense that he'd eventually tell them who Ana really was, especially if she hoped to stay friends with Harry. She wanted to be their friend too, and she couldn't do that by being dishonest with them. It was bad enough that she had to lie to them tonight. She hated lying...

But she still had a bad feeling about them finding out she was a Carrows. She knew she could trust them. Harry trusted them, after all, and they'd all been through so much together. But the way they'd talked about her parents at dinner...

She shuddered. Not good.

Harry looked over at her finally and noticed the pensive look on her face. "Whatcha thinking about?" he asked quietly.

Ana tore her gaze from the darkness outside and faced him. She cleared her throat and looked down at her hands. "Hermione and Ron seem nice," she said carefully, not wanting to voice her fears outright.

Harry guessed what was bothering her immediately. "They'll understand, Ana. They just don't know you yet," he told her comfortingly.

"Yeah, that's what I'm worried about," she said sadly.

Harry felt a pang in his heart and reached out for her hand. "They won't care, Ana. Trust me, okay?"

Ana slowly met his eyes, saw the kindness in them, the eagerness to make her feel better, and gave a small smile. She trusted him. Of course she did. But she didn't have to believe him.

"Okay, Harry."

He smiled. "Come on. Let's get some rest. Tomorrow's a big day."

They rose and parted at their staircases, saying goodnight one last time before disappearing upwards.

Yes, tomorrow is a big day, Ana thought as she climbed. But would it be a good one?

Somehow she didn't think so.

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AN: Hey guys! Chapter 12 is here! Yay! I know there's not a lot going on in it, so sorry about that. I had originally planned to fit in the first day of school with this chapter, but it ended up being longer than I thought. So, first day of school next time, then. Should be interesting... Hopefully that one will have a bit more action in it. I'd appreciate reviews if you're up for the giving :). They mean a lot to me! And thanks as always to my past reviewers! You guys are awesome. Thanks for reading and have a great day!

Chapter 13

Morning came too soon.

It felt to Ana as though she had just closed her eyes to sleep when the rays of morning sunlight came streaming through the dorm room window. She felt like a zombie getting out of bed. She hardly remembered getting ready; all she knew was that she was now walking down the stairs and into the common room with Lavender and Parvati, who seemed to Ana to be *far* too cheerful this early in the morning.

She hadn't seen Hermione at all the night before or that morning, and Harry and Ron were nowhere to be found either. Ana figured they must be down at breakfast already. She was vaguely aware that Lavender was talking excitedly about a class with someone named Professor Trelawney as the three of them descended down to the ground floor.

Ana simply smiled and nodded when she felt it was appropriate. She had far too many other things on her mind right now to do much else.

First day of school...

She was nervous and excited at the same time. Excited to learn new things, nervous about making mistakes. Excited about meeting new people, nervous those people wouldn't be nearly as excited to meet her...

Her head felt heavy with all the thoughts and worries rushing through it, but she determinedly placed a smile on her face as the three girls walked into the Great Hall. Her eyes traveled over to the Gryffindor table where they were immediately met with Harry's. He grinned and stood as she approached, making room for her at the seat next to him.

"Morning," he said cheerfully.

"Morning," she said smiling.

She sat down next to him and looked around. The Hall was fairly empty, which she was slightly surprised by, though it was still rather early, she supposed. She noticed Hermione and Ron sitting across from them bickering quietly about something. They hadn't yet noticed her appearance.

"You hungry?" Harry asked her, before stuffing a forkful of scrambled eggs in his mouth.

Ana looked around at the food-filled table uncertainly. She was scared that if she ate anything it would just come right back up the way her stomach was feeling. She didn't want Harry to know this, however, so she picked up a piece of toast and started smoothing some jam onto it absentmindedly.

Harry watched her with a small smile, knowing she must be very nervous. He was glad she was there, though. Hermione had started to badger him for answers about her shortly before Ana had entered the Hall with Lavender and Parvati. It helped that Hermione so easily fell into small arguments with Ron about one thing or another, which is what they both were now currently engaged in and thus distracted.

From Ron's exasperated and disbelieving looks and Hermione's determined stare, Harry had a sneaking suspicion it had something to do with their schedules, which they had just received.

"Honestly Hermione, how can you still be taking all those classes?" Ron was saying while he looked disdainfully down at the paper in Hermione's hands.

She sighed in frustration. "Ron, I told you a thousand times, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy are two very useful subjects. You should consider taking them yourself," she said.

Ron looked offended. "Me? Take Ancient Runes and Arithmancy? You must be off your rocker today," he scoffed.

"Oh right, *I'm* the one who's off my rocker while you're the sane one who takes a class like Divination!" she replied loudly, earning two murderous glares from Lavender and Parvati, who had stopped their giggling abruptly at the insult to their favorite class.

“Would you two knock it off?” Harry said, exasperated. “Geez, it’s not even nine yet, and you’re already at it.” He shook his head in disbelief.

Ana smiled and tried to hold back a laugh. They’d been putting on a pretty good show. She could hardly believe that two people who fought as much as they did could be a couple. They were definitely cute together, though...

Harry looked over at her and rolled his eyes towards the two across the table, who were both looking rather sullen now.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Harry said suddenly, picking up a sheet of paper from the table. “I got your schedule for you, Ana,” he said as he handed it to her.

She took it eagerly, running her eyes down the page as she read all the classes she’d be taking. Harry’s was also on the table, and she looked down at it, comparing the two. She felt her spirits raise a little as she did.

“We’ve got the same schedule!” she exclaimed, slightly surprised.

Harry, however, didn’t look surprised in the slightest and grinned at her. “Yeah. I’m sure Dumbledore had a lot to do with that, though,” he told her.

She looked at him confused. “Why would he do that?”

“Well, he told me to look after you, didn’t he? How am I supposed to do that if we have different classes?” he said with a smile, his eyes twinkling.

Ana felt a blush creep over her cheeks. “Oh...right,” she said softly, secretly very pleased.

Harry laughed good-naturedly and focused once again on his eggs. Ana looked up from her plate to see Ron stuffing his face with sausage, and Hermione staring at her schedule once again. More people were trickling into the Hall now. The noise rose as students conversed and bustled about, comparing schedules and chatting excitedly.

Dean, Seamus, and Neville came walking up together and sat down near them. They seemed to have noticed Ana for the first time and introduced themselves politely. She returned the gesture and tried answering their questions about who she was the best she could. They were all very curious as to why she'd come so late, but her explanations of being home-schooled and that her parents were abroad seemed to satisfy them.

Hermione listened intently as well, though she still looked as though something about the story bothered her. Harry was actually quite proud at how well Ana seemed to be handling herself. She was soon a part of the general morning conversation, listening as Neville talked about how excited he was for the Herbology lesson.

All of a sudden, there was a commotion overhead, and the fluttering of wings signaled the arrival of the morning post. Owls swooped down in front of various students, delivering the mail. Harry was slightly surprised when a large brown barn owl landed right in front of him, nearly knocking his orange juice over.

A similar one had dropped in front of Hermione, handing her an issue of *The Daily Prophet*, but Ron was much more interested in the package now in front of Harry.

"Who'd be sending you a package?" he asked curiously, not taking his eyes off the wrapped parcel.

"Dunno," Harry said, bewildered. He picked up the medium sized package and tested its weight, frowning. Surely Sirius wouldn't have sent him anything yet? He'd only just left the day before...And the Dursley's sure as hell wouldn't be sending him anything. But then who...?

"Well, open it then," Ron said impatiently. He eyed the package with great interest.

Hermione looked up from her newspaper and also laid her eyes on the parcel in front of Harry, though hers were filled with suspicion rather than curiosity.

“Harry, wait, maybe you should let Dumbledore or Lupin look at that first...” she trailed off hesitantly.

Harry raised his eyebrows at her. “What, do you think Voldemort’s found a way to kill me through the post? ‘Death by package’ maybe?” he said skeptically.

Hermione scowled, not finding his joke amusing in the slightest, and Ron looked as though he had just swallowed an ice cube whole.

“*Don’t say that, Harry!* I don’t get why you have to say his name all the time,” Ron shuddered, looking horrified that Harry was talking about the Dark Lord so freely.

Harry sighed. “Ron, you really need to get over this name thing. And I’m opening it myself, Hermione,” he told the both of them, making up his mind. He wasn’t going to look like an idiot and have his teachers open every single thing he got in the mail for him.

He tore into the paper, ripping it off in shreds. Ana and Ron leaned in, looking very interested, and Hermione had crossed her arms and was pretending like she could care less, though her eyes soon found their way to the package as well.

A bright orange box was soon revealed, plain except for an embossment on the very top consisting of what looked like three intersected W’s.

Ron narrowed his eyes at this. “Hey, isn’t that...”

But Harry had already taken the lid off, revealing the box’s contents. On the very top was a note. Harry picked it up curiously and read:

Harry,

Here you are, mate! The first one, just like we promised. Happy tricking!

Cheers,

Fred and George

P.S. Get Ron good for us, would you?

Harry read it over once more and grinned. He looked into the box and saw the new and improved Trick Tumbler sitting there in all its gleaming glory, looking deceptively innocent.

Ana laughed when she saw it. She'd almost forgotten about Fred and George's invention. Ron peered into the box, his eyes widening as he saw the gold contraption.

"Is that...is that a Trick Tumbler!" he sputtered, looking shocked beyond belief. "I can't believe they sent you one!" he exclaimed. He looked up into the air as if expecting to see an owl carrying a package for him as well, but there was no more to be seen.

"Is that what they were going on about when we went to visit them?" Hermione asked Ron, looking at the Trick Tumbler disapprovingly.

"I'm gonna kill them," Ron muttered angrily. "They told me I couldn't have one cause it wasn't ready yet. Obviously ready now, though, isn't it. Why'd they send you one?" he asked, as if he still couldn't believe it.

"Oh, well...Ana and I went to Diagon Alley earlier this week to get our stuff, and we went to visit Fred and George when we were there. They showed it to us. I think we were the first to see it actually," Harry said, thinking. "Anyway, they told me I could have one when they were done working out the kinks," he shrugged.

Ron looked utterly disgusted and envious at the same time, but Hermione was looking at Ana and Harry now, her newspaper forgotten.

"You went to Diagon Alley last week? How'd you get there?" she asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

"Floo," Harry said simply, picking up his goblet for a drink so he wouldn't have to say anything else. Hermione looked as though she were about to ask another question when Ron spoke again.

"It's the Deluxe version, too," he said, staring at the invention morosely. "You'd think they'd consider sending one to their own brother, but *no*..."

Harry looked very uncomfortable and suddenly wished that Fred and George hadn't sent him the thing at all. "Er...Ron, you can have it if you want. Really, I don't need it. Not much of a prankster," he said carefully to him.

Ana looked at Harry and smiled to herself, thinking it was a very nice thing of him to do. Ron, however, heaved one last sigh before shaking his head.

"Naw, mate. You keep it. I'll get one eventually, I suppose. Guess I'll have to send in for one like everyone else," he said dejectedly.

Before Harry could ask him if he was sure, the bell rang. Students streamed toward the doors and made their way to their respective classes, schedules in hand. Harry hastily stuffed the Trick Tumbler into his bag and rose with Ana, Ron, and Hermione. They walked out the doors together and headed off for their first class, Herbology.

Ron and Hermione walked side by side a little ahead of Harry and Ana. The bundle of nerves in her stomach were starting to get to Ana again, so she turned to talk to Harry in an effort to put her mind on something else.

"That was really sweet of you, Harry," she said quietly so Ron wouldn't hear, referring to the Trick Tumbler.

Harry slowed for an instant before resuming the pace and blushed, not expecting the compliment. "It was nothing...I mean, it's true. I don't really pull pranks that often anyways..." he mumbled.

Ana just gave him a bright, knowing smile, saying nothing more. They shuffled into the greenhouse where the Herbology lesson was held with the Hufflepuffs and took seats at the long table. Professor Sprout welcomed them all back and immediately got them to work peeling Gurdyroots.

Ana listened politely as Neville began talking to her excitedly about Gurdyroots and their purposes. He seemed to know quite a lot about them. He also seemed ecstatic to have someone new to talk to about different kinds of plants, seeing as how everyone else wasn't really all that interested. Ana, however, was very interested, even *if* she had read *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* from front to back already.

Harry looked over at her discretely as he tugged at his Gurdyroot and smiled. She was doing just fine so far. She hardly looked nervous now, and she seemed to be getting on pretty well with everyone. It hadn't escaped his attention, however, that Hermione hadn't spoken to her at all that morning. He figured she was waiting for an explanation first. His suspicions were confirmed when she leaned in towards him from across the table.

"We'll talk at lunch, okay?" she whispered. Harry nodded reluctantly and looked over at Ron, but he was too busy struggling with his Gurdyroot to notice. He gave the thing a mighty tug, which ended up flinging the entire thing into the air before it landed unceremoniously on Professor Sprout's head. There was an eruption of laughter while Ron turned scarlet.

"Er, sorry Professor," he said with a sheepish grin.

Professor Sprout seemed unaffected by the disruption, however, and responded simply by placing a new Gurdyroot in front of Ron, though Harry could've sworn he heard her mumble something to Ron that sounded very much like "nice aim."

Ana continued to have fun throughout the rest of the lesson, and before she knew it, the bell had rung yet again, signifying the end of class. She could hardly believe it. She'd survived her first class at Hogwarts without any problems! Maybe it was going to be a good day after all...

Care of Magical Creatures was next, which Ana was very excited about since Hagrid was teaching it. They made their way across the lawn, robes rustling with each step.

“Wonder what Hagrid’s teaching us about this year,” Harry said as he stared down towards Hagrid’s hut.

“I don’t care what it is, just as long as it hasn’t got sharp teeth,” Ron said with a shudder, recalling past classes with Hagrid. “Or sharp anything, really,” he added as an afterthought.

“Fat chance of that Weasel. If there’s anything that big oaf is good at, it’s coming up with new ways of trying to get his students killed,” a drawling voice said from behind them.

The four of them turned to see Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson glaring back at them. Ana felt an unfamiliar surge of anger at this insult to Hagrid. Who the heck did this kid think he was? And how could anyone hate Hagrid?

“Shut up, Malfoy,” Harry growled. He couldn’t stand it when Malfoy and his goons insulted Hagrid.

Ron looked as though he wanted to punch Malfoy’s lights out, but Hermione tugged at his arm. “Ignore him. Let’s go.”

“Better listen to your girlfriend, Weasley,” Malfoy said, sniggering.

Hermione had to pull Ron off towards the hut to prevent him from murdering him, and Harry turned to follow them, taking Ana with him as he went. Ana allowed this, but couldn’t help staring back at the group of Slytherins, who seemed to be looking at her strangely. Pansy screwed up her face as she looked at her, and Ana distinctly heard her ask Malfoy who she was.

His response, if any, went unheard, however, as Hagrid’s booming voice rang through the summer air.

“ello there, everyone! Welcome back, then,” he beamed, looking around at them all as if it were Christmas morning.

He spotted Ana and gave her a wink, which immediately made her smile and forget about Malfoy for the moment. The Gryffindors and Slytherins all crowded around him in front of his hut, waiting for Hagrid to tell them what they would be doing.

"Today we're goin' ter be learnin' about Fire Slugs!" Hagrid said excitedly as he looked expectantly around at everyone as if waiting for them to cheer. When no one did (save for Malfoy, who "woo'ed" sarcastically), he shifted uncomfortably.

Hermione shot a glare at Malfoy and jumped in quickly. "What are Fire Slugs, Hagrid?" she asked, careful to place a lot of interest in her voice even though she already knew what Fire Slugs were.

The smile immediately returned to the large man's face at this. "Well, 'ermione, let me show yeh!" He beckoned them all around his cabin, where a large open crate sat. The students gathered round and looked cautiously into it. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ana were closest, but they backed up quickly when a wave of heat emanating from the box hit their faces.

Ana caught a glimpse of several rather large slugs a dark red in color. She also noticed that several of them had erupted into flames. A distinct moan was heard from Ron, and Harry and Hermione were looking apprehensively into the crate, though neither of them seemed very surprised. Ana got the sudden feeling that dangerous creatures were a staple in Hagrid's class.

"Aren't they beautiful?" Hagrid said, beaming down at the slugs. Malfoy sniggered and many of the students exchanged looks. "Now, I wan' you lot to partner up and grab a slug. Don' forget to put on yer dragon hide gloves! When yeh've done that, find a spot on the grass ter put em down and collect the slime they leave behind with these 'ere jars," he pointed to several clear glass jars sitting next to the crate. "Be careful. They ignite every couple o' seconds to restore their body heat, which they need to maintain to produce the slime. If yeh get burned, jus' slap some o' the slime on it. Great for healin'. Now off yeh go!"

Everyone hesitated for a moment, and then reluctantly grabbed their gloves and partnered up, arguing with each other about who would be the one to pick the slug up. Ron and Hermione stepped forward first, and Harry partnered with Ana.

"I'm not touching that thing, Hermione," Ron said, shaking his head indignantly.

Hermione just sighed. "Honestly, Ron..."

She then walked determinedly up to the crate, spotting a slug and waiting for the moment its flames extinguished to pick it up. She grabbed it quickly and brought it over to Ron, setting on the ground gently.

Ron fidgeted and looked a little embarrassed. "Sure, make it look easy, why don't you."

Other students, however, weren't having quite as much luck with getting the slugs out of the crate unscathed. Yelps were heard here and there when a slug erupted into flames in someone's hand.

Harry grinned and turned to Ana, but was surprised to find she had walked up to the crate already and was staring down into it.

"Ana, wait! Let me do that," he said rushing up to her.

Ana turned to him, smiling slightly. "It's all right, Harry. I can do it." She made to reach down into the crate, but Harry stopped her.

"No, really, I'll do it. No one should get third degree burns on their first day of school," he grinned and pulled her away. "I'll let you pick up the slime, okay?" he told her as though he was doing her a favor.

She laughed. "Okay fine. Though I think I'm getting the better end of the deal here."

Harry grinned at her and grabbed a slug that wasn't currently on fire and rushed it over by Ron and Hermione's. The slug burst into flames seconds after Harry released it.

"Look, how sweet. Hero Potter saves the day," Pansy Parkinson said mockingly. She was standing with Draco, who laughed loudly at this.

Harry stiffened, and Ana glared at the pug-faced girl. Before either of them could respond, however, a shriek emitted from Pansy, and she began hopping up and down on one foot.

Everyone looked around and started laughing when they saw that a slug had apparently crawled a bit too close to her due to the fact that her shoe was currently on fire. Ana succeeded in holding back her laughter, but she couldn't help the satisfied smile that sprang to her face. Hagrid rushed over quickly and doused the flames with a wave of his wand.

Ron was doubled over with laughter, however, and even Hermione was chuckling silently. Harry turned his attention once again to Ana and smiled at her. They then got busy collecting the slime, which turned out to be a fairly easy job. They just made sure to be careful not to get too close to the slugs.

Before they knew it the bell had rang once more, and Hagrid was bidding them all farewell. Ana moved to follow Harry, Ron, and Hermione back up to the castle, but Hagrid shuffled over and asked if he could have a word with her.

"Oh, sure Hagrid," she said. Harry stopped and looked as though he planned on waiting for her, but she shook her head at him. "Go on Harry, it's okay. I'll catch up."

"Yeah, Harry, come on," Hermione said, throwing him a meaningful look. Harry saw it and knew that Hermione wanted to talk with him about Ana. He looked torn for a moment, but finally sighed and nodded, waving goodbye to Ana and following Ron and Hermione across the lawn.

Ana watched them go and turned back to Hagrid. "What's up, Hagrid?"

He smiled at her. "Jus' wonderin' 'ow yer firs' day is goin'. Yeh like it so far?"

She smiled right back at him, warmed that he cared about her first day. "It's been great so far, Hagrid. I was a little nervous this morning, but I feel much better now. I really enjoyed your class today," she told him genuinely.

He blushed at this and gave a bashful grin. "Glad yeh liked it. And what about the students? Not givin' yeh a hard time are they?" he asked.

Ana's thoughts immediately turned to Hermione at this. "Er...no. They've been very kind," she said carefully. It was sort of true. Hermione hadn't *not* been nice to her, and everyone else seemed to be receiving her pretty well.

“And what abou’ Ron and ‘ermione?” he asked, almost as if he knew that they hadn’t warmed up to her yet.

Ana fidgeted. "Oh...well, they've been nice, I guess. Hermione seems a little wary of me, though," she shrugged and looked down at her feet.

Hagrid nodded with a grim look. "I figured as much. Don' you worry about them. They'll come around," he said assuredly.

Ana looked up and smiled at him, nodding. "You're probably right."

Hagrid smiled at her. "All righ' then, off yeh go. Remember, if yeh need anythin', yeh can always ask."

"I know, Hagrid. Thanks for being so kind. It means a lot," Ana smiled at him.

He blushed again. "It's nothin'. Go on then. I'm sure 'arry's waitin' for yeh."

Ana gave him one last grateful smile before saying goodbye and heading back up to the castle. As she entered the doors, she could hear the commotion of the students as they all gathered into the Great Hall for lunch. Ana, however, wanted to head up to the common room first to drop off some books she was carrying before finding Harry, and so she made her way quickly up the marble staircase towards Gryffindor Tower.

[illegible]

“Well?”

Harry looked up from where he was sitting on the common room couch at Hermione’s expectant face. She was standing near the fireplace with her arms crossed and looked very determined to get answers from him. Ron had seated himself in one of the armchairs and was also looking at Harry with interest. They had come up to the common room because they knew that they’d be able to talk freely there, seeing as how everyone else was getting lunch.

“Well what?” he said, trying to delay the inevitable.

Hermione uncrossed her arms, looking quite exasperated. “Harry, come on. Who is she? Why are you so friendly with her? Why was she sorted before the ceremony? Why—“

“All right, all right!” Harry said loudly. “Calm down, would you,” he said, running a hand through his hair. He sighed and tried to sort out in his mind how he should begin.

“Just tell us how you met Ana to begin with,” Ron said with a shrug, not really understanding why Harry seemed so hesitant. “She seems all right to me. Did her parent’s just drop her off early, or something?” he asked.

Harry grimaced slightly. “Er, no. And her name’s not really Ana. Technically, at least,” he said carefully, trying to gauge both of their reactions to this.

Ron looked confused and Hermione frowned. “Then what is her real name?” she asked with a raised brow.

Harry took a deep breath. *This is it.*

“It’s...Anabelle.” He paused and Ron and Hermione looked expectantly at him. Harry looked down and spoke again. “Anabelle Carrows,” he said quietly.

Hermione gasped and Ron looked positively horrified at this revelation. It was what Harry had been dreading.

"What!" Hermione said when she had overcome her initial shock.

“Listen, I know what you’re thinking, but hear me out, okay?” Harry said hurriedly. “I know it looks bad—“

“Bad? Harry, she’s related to two of the most faithful followers of Voldemort out there, and all you can say is that you know it looks bad?” Hermione exclaimed, disbelief written all over her features.

She had been so upset she hadn't even realized she'd said the Dark Lord's name with no problem at all. Ron, however, had noticed and flinched when the name had flown out of her mouth.

“She’s their daughter,” Harry clarified softly.

"Explain," Hermione commanded firmly.

Harry took one last deep breath, and then he started from the beginning, telling them how he had found Ana in the Forest, how they had brought her to the Hospital Wing, her story, Diagon Alley...everything.

Hermione and Ron listened intently to his every word, keeping silent as he told the incredible story, hardly believing their ears.

[illegible]

Ana came upon the Fat Lady and gave her the password. She stepped into the portrait hole, but had only taken two steps before she halted immediately.

Harry's voice was echoing into the short hallway from the common room, and Ana realized with a jolt that he was telling Ron and Hermione about her. It dawned on her that they hadn't heard her enter, and so she flattened herself against the wall and kept perfectly still so she could listen.

When Harry finished, a thick silence engulfed the room, and Ana wished she could see Ron and Hermione's faces. After a while, she heard Ron's voice.

“Whoa,” he said.

Ana heard the distinct sound of someone pacing and knew that it had to be Hermione. She felt a lump in her throat as something told her that these reactions weren’t a good sign.

“This—I—What—“ Hermione sputtered uncharacteristically, seemingly at a loss for words. Finally, words came bursting from her mouth. “I can’t believe Dumbledore is allowing this to just happen!”

Ana felt her heart sink to the pit of her stomach.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry said angrily.

“Harry, the Carrows are still in league with Voldemort. They’ve been on the run for 16 years, they’re two of the most wanted criminals in the entire wizarding world!” Hermione said heatedly. “Would you like me to go on?”

“So? That doesn’t mean Ana is too,” Harry said, just as heatedly.

“You almost got *killed* because of her, Harry!” Hermione shouted.

Ana heard Harry shoot up from where she guessed he was seated on the couch. “She would have *died* if I hadn’t pushed her out of the way, Hermione. Or do you think I just should have let her?” Harry said, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

“Harry, I’m sure she’s a nice girl, okay? And it’s clear she’s been through a lot, but have you gone mad? You have enough trouble to deal with without adding hers into the mix, too, or have you overlooked that?” Hermione said bitinglly.

A silence fell. Ana listened and felt her stomach give a lurch. She’d heard enough.

Quietly, she exited out the way she had come, slowly making her way down through the castle. She found she had difficulty drawing proper breaths for some reason. She needed to get outside. Maybe some fresh air would help get rid of the nauseous feeling that had engulfed her the minute she’d left the common room.

She glided past the Great Hall, the cacophony of voices following her outside where she headed towards the lake. She had a lot of things to sort out right now...

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Harry was bristling.

He was having a hard time keeping his temper under control, and he felt as though he were going to explode any minute now. He could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"Of course, silly me. How could I forget that my life's filled with 'troubles'? How stupid of me," he said sarcastically.

Hermione's jaw clenched, but she didn't back down. "Harry, the Carrows' are ruthless. They always have been. They're going to find Ana eventually, and you're going to be dragged into it somehow if you keep this up. You were almost killed already, and that was an accident! It will give Voldemort an even better chance at getting to you than he had before! The prophecy—"

"Don't!" Harry said, clenching his fists. "Don't talk to me about the damn prophecy, Hermione. That has nothing to do with this," he spat.

After what had happened at the Ministry of Magic earlier that year, Harry had told his two best friends about the prophecy Dumbledore had spoke to him about. He regretted it now.

"It has everything to do with this, Harry," Hermione said, more quietly now. "If something happens to you—"

"Well, that's my problem, isn't it? Not yours," he said, his eyes now dark with anger.

Hermione looked at him almost pleadingly now, and she took a step towards him. "Harry, I'm just trying to help you. We don't want you to get hurt, or...or worse. It would just be easier to stay away from her, wouldn't it?"

But Harry refused to soften. In fact, he looked more irate than before. "Right, and when has taking the easy route ever got me anywhere? She's my friend, Hermione. I'm all she's got right now, and I'm not going to just abandon her," he said vehemently.

Hermione stiffened yet again, and the stubborn look of not backing down returned to her eyes. "Fine, if you want to get yourself killed, then go ahead. Just don't expect me to pretend like everything's dandy!" she yelled.

Harry shook his head in disbelief. He turned his head to look at Ron, who had been silently watching the argument between the two of them from his seat in the armchair. He looked as though he was still trying to sort everything out.

"What about you, Ron? You don't agree with her, do you?" Harry asked him hopefully.

Ron looked incredibly uncomfortable as his eyes moved from Harry's dark face to Hermione's, who looked as though she was daring him to disagree with her.

"Er...She does have a point, I guess, Harry..." he trailed off uncertainly. The truth was, he didn't really know what to think.

Harry's face fell as he looked at the both of them. "I don't believe it. Of all people, I thought you two would understand..."

"Mate—" Ron began, but Harry cut him off.

"No. Ana's a good person. She doesn't deserve to be treated differently just because her parents are who they are," he said with conviction. "Voldemort already wants me dead. Being friends with her isn't going to change anything. Besides, last I checked, I was the one with the scar, not you," he said to the both of them. "Or have you overlooked that?" he asked mockingly, holding Hermione's stare as he did.

He stood there for a moment, looking at both of them. Hermione looked flushed, but her face remained as stern as ever, and Ron had paled a little. When he was certain they had nothing more to say,

Harry turned on his heel and walked determinedly out of the portrait hole.

He had to find Ana...

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A warm breeze swept gently across the lake, and Ana closed her eyes as she felt its gentle touch on her face. It was only then that she realized she was crying.

The breeze felt cool on her wet cheek, and she quickly wiped the tears away. She sat with her knees pulled up against her underneath the large tree where she and Harry had had a picnic only days before. She wished she could go back to that moment right now, rather than be sitting here with Hermione's words echoing through her mind.

'You have enough trouble to deal with without adding hers into the mix, too...'

Another tear escaped against her will. She'd been such a fool. How could she have actually believed for a moment that they would understand and accept her despite who she really was? She'd never felt more naïve in her entire life.

And the really terrible thing about all of it was that she didn't blame them in the slightest. She didn't blame them because they were right, and she knew it.

Harry *did* have enough problems. She'd been selfish to think that they could go on like they had been. She was more trouble than she was worth, it seemed, just like her father had said. And there was no way she would come between Harry and his best friends. But here she was thinking like Harry actually still wanted to be friends with her. He probably came to his senses after she had left the common room.

She felt her stomach clench. *It's for the best. You know it's for the best.*

But then why did it hurt so badly?

“Where’s scarhead?” a voice said from behind her, cutting through her thoughts like a knife.

Ana whipped her head around to find herself staring at the blonde boy that Harry had called Malfoy. He was looking at her with a smug expression on his face, his arms crossed.

She stiffened and discretely wiped her face clear of stray tears. “Why do you care?” she asked, staring at him suspiciously. It wasn’t hard to deduce that Harry and this Malfoy kid weren’t exactly the best of buddies.

He shrugged. “Every time I’ve seen you around he’s stuck to your side like a leech, or something. Draco Malfoy, by the way,” he said, as though this was something that should impress her. “And you are?”

He was studying her with that same suspicious look that she had seen in his eyes the night before, after the feast. She suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable underneath it.

“Ana Brighton,” she said curtly, wishing he’d take the hint and just leave her alone.

Draco peered at her silently for a moment. “What’s wrong then? You seem a little upset. Did I touch a nerve or something? Worried Potter’s not here to hold your hand for you?” he said coldly, a smirk growing on his face.

Ana glared at him, but before she could respond back with her own cutting remark, another voice she knew very well stopped her short.

“He is here, Malfoy.”

Malfoy and Ana both turned to see Harry standing nearby, his eyes fixed on Malfoy’s in a cold stare. Ana was a bit taken aback by the look on Harry’s face at that moment. He looked dangerous.

Malfoy suddenly didn’t look so tough, but the sneer he’d been sporting stayed put all the same.

“There you are, Potty. Come to save the day again, have you?”

Harry’s glare hardened, and Ana saw his fists clench. “Get out of here, Malfoy.”

Malfoy threw a glance at Ana before turning back to Harry and shrugged. “Gladly,” he said, moving to brush past Harry with a smirk.

Harry, however, caught the blonde boy’s arm just as he was about to pass and leaned in menacingly towards him. “Stay away from her,” he warned quietly, his eyes as dark as ever.

Malfoy ripped his arm away from Harry’s grip, looking disgusted. “Don’t touch me, Potter. You’d do well to remember that,” he said threateningly. With one last glare of hatred, he turned round and made his way back up to the castle.

Harry watched him go, his body still tensed with anger. He hadn’t been able to find Ana in the Great Hall, and the minute he came outside and spotted her underneath the tree and Malfoy’s blonde head nearby, he’d felt an unbelievable rush of anger come over him. He’d crossed the lawn in record time, thank Merlin. The idea of Malfoy even looking at Ana made him want to break something. Who knows how many times he’d been able to insult her before Harry could get there?

With this thought, Harry turned back towards Ana. His concern grew when he saw she was staring blankly out across the lake, hugging her legs against her tightly.

“Ana?” he said softly, stepping closer to her as he did. When she didn’t respond, he went to kneel down beside her. “Are you okay?”

It was only then that he noticed how red and bloodshot her eyes were. She’d been crying. Anger filled him once more at the sight. “What happened? What did he say to you? I swear I’m gonna kill that—”

“Harry, stop,” she said finally, tearing her eyes away from the glimmering lake. “I’m not crying because of Malfoy,” she said obviously, as though crying over him would be stupid.

Harry frowned. "Then why...?"

Ana sighed. "...I went up to the common room after I talked to Hagrid..." she trailed off softly.

Harry felt his heart stop, and he paled. "You heard," he said, realization dawning.

"I heard," she confirmed quietly, turning to study the lake once again.

"Ana—"

"She's right," she said, interrupting him.

Harry stared at her. "What?" he asked, not sure he'd heard her correctly.

Ana sighed. "She's right, Harry. You have too many things to worry about as it is. Gods, I'm such a fool," she said, shaking her head.

"Ana, you're not a fool. And you're not a problem either, no matter what those two say. I'm so angry at them right now I can't even see straight," he said, also turning his head to look at the lake.

Ana turned, looking horrified. "What? Harry, no! Please don't be angry with them," she pleaded.

"Of course I'm angry with them, Ana! They don't know you like I do. I'm not going to just stop talking to you because of your bloody parents. Like I told Hermione, Voldemort's after me whether I like it or not and being your friend isn't going to change that. It's my decision, anyways, not theirs," he said heatedly, feeling his earlier temper returning.

Ana looked as though she were ready to cry again. "Harry, no, I refuse to come between you and your friends! You've all been through so much together. Please, I couldn't live with myself if you stopped talking to them because of me!"

Harry softened as he took in her distraught face, and he felt his anger fade immediately. "Ana, it's going to be fine. They're just being a

couple of gits right now. They'll come around," he said gently. "I'm not going to back down when I know they're wrong. They'll have to realize that sooner or later."

He reached up and brushed a stray tear from her cheek, letting his hand linger a second longer than he probably should have. He grinned at her then and lowered his hand. "You can't get rid of me that easy, Ana."

A small laugh escaped her, and she found herself grinning too. "I never wanted to," she said softly.

"Course you didn't. Who else would pick up deadly Fire Slugs for you?" he joked, a mischievous glint in his green eyes.

Ana laughed, feeling her spirits lighten. "Deadly, huh? Oh Harry, you're so brave!" she swooned jestingly, her voice rising an octave.

"Shut up," he laughed, nudging her playfully.

She laughed too, feeling much better than she had been.

Things weren't perfect. Ron and Hermione disapproved of her, Malfoy obviously seemed suspicious of her, and she still had a long way to go with her magical education...but at least she had Harry. As long as she had him, she was confident that nothing else could ever bother her.

Well, that's what she would keep telling herself, anyway...

Harry studied Ana quietly as they sat there. The wind rustled the leaves above their heads gently, and a white, fluffy cloud moved slowly across the blue sky, its reflection mirrored smoothly on the wide lake in front of them.

He didn't care what Hermione said. The thought of not talking to Ana anymore made him feel hollow inside. There was just...something about her. They had bonded over their time together so far. He couldn't ignore that.

It pained him to think of Ron and Hermione's reactions, though. He hated it more than anything when he got into a fight with either of them. But they'd come around. They had to. They had to because he didn't want to think about what would happen if they didn't.

He sighed. He shouldn't be surprised. He was quite used to life throwing complications his way, and this wasn't any different.

He felt torn. It shouldn't have to be like this. He shouldn't have to choose between his best friends and his new one.

He furrowed his brows in determination. He wasn't going to choose. *Things will work out all right*, he thought. *They always do...*

A dull throbbing came suddenly from his scar then, as it had been doing off and on ever since Voldemort returned.

He grimaced and reached up to rub at his forehead absentmindedly.

Well...almost always.

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AN: Ooooh, trouble's a-brewin! Wow, sorry, that was lame. Anyhoo, I hope you guys liked this one. I know Hermione's being a bit rash, but she's just trying to protect Harry :). Also, I couldn't remember if Harry actually did tell Ron and Hermione about the prophecy, so sorry if that's wrong. Just assume they did if it is.

Thanks to my reviewers again, and thanks to everyone who's reading this story. I appreciate it a whole lot! Let me know what you guys think so far! Your comments make me smile :). Thanks and have a great day!

Chapter 14

The rest of Ana's first day of school passed by fairly quickly.

She found Divination to be...interesting. Though apparently not nearly as much as Lavender and Parvati did, who seemed so intensely focused on the class and on what Professor Trelawney was saying Ana would have thought they were in a trance or something.

Harry and Ana had grabbed a table together in the dusky, heavily perfumed room, sitting among a few stares and whispers, though Ana wasn't certain if they were directed at her or Harry. Probably a mixture of both, she thought.

Harry had stiffened slightly when Ron came walking through the door, and Ana couldn't help noticing that Ron himself seemed extremely uncomfortable by the situation. He looked torn for a moment as he stood near the doorway, shooting an uncertain glance at Harry as if looking for some sign. Harry, however, resolutely kept his eyes fixed on Professor Trelawney, who was telling everyone to settle down and take a seat.

Ana felt a surge of guilt as she watched Ron morosely make his way over to the front of the room, where Neville was seated. This was all her fault. If it weren't for her, Harry would be sitting with Ron right now. His best friend.

The guilt ate away at her throughout the rest of the lesson, and because of this she remained distracted, though she had a feeling she wasn't missing much. Professor Trelawney struck her as being slightly loony, anyway. Half the things coming out of her mouth didn't seem remotely relevant or important.

The art of Augury was the topic of the lesson, and Ana gleaned that it meant the divining of the future through the study of birds. She hadn't the slightest clue what birds had to do with the future and was slightly nervous when Trelawney gave them homework in which they had to observe the flight of several birds in their free time and see if they could see any signs or omens.

“Don’t worry,” Harry said to her as they filed out of the classroom. “Just predict some horrible event and she’ll eat it up. The more gruesome the better. That’s what me and R—”

He stopped abruptly, and Ana knew immediately that he had been about to say “Ron.”

“Harry, I can’t take this. Would you please talk to him? Really, I want you to. I won’t care. You can still be his friend, you know...” she trailed off pleadingly. She really didn’t mind. Just because his friends didn’t want anything to do with her didn’t mean that Harry couldn’t still at least *talk* to them.

Harry’s eyes hardened, and he kept his stare forward as they walked through the halls together, his jaw clenching slightly. “No. He needs to know that I’m not okay with this. The stupid git would probably jump off a bridge if Hermione told him to. Wonder if she put him under the Imperious Curse...” he mumbled agitatedly.

“Harry! Don’t say that!” Ana gasped. “Listen, I know you’re upset, but they’re still your friends. I’m fine with it, trust me,” she said.

“Fine?” he turned to her in disbelief. “How can you be fine with it Ana? My “friends” are refusing to give you a chance!”

Ana fidgeted and shifted her bag a little on her shoulder. “Okay, so maybe I’m not *fine* with it,” she conceded after a moment, frowning slightly. “But that doesn’t matter. Really, Harry, you can still be friends with them and me at the same time. It is possible...” she said.

“No,” he shook his head stubbornly. “Until they apologize to you, I’m not talking to either of them.”

Ana bit back the urge to argue with him further, knowing he wouldn’t budge no matter what she said. Instead, she just sighed. “Well, I wish you’d at least consider it. I’ve got to go to my lesson. I’ll see you later?” she asked, stopping as they neared the Fat Lady’s portrait.

Harry turned to her in surprise. He’d forgotten she still had to go to her lessons every day. “Oh...yeah. Yeah, I’ll definitely see you later,” he smiled at her. The irritation that had come over him with the

mention of Ron and Hermione had dissipated, and a playful glint appeared in his eyes as he looked at her. "Say hi to Shrubbery for me, would you?"

Ana sent him a reproachful look. "Goodbye, Harry," she said amidst his laughter and began making her way to her classroom.

"What?" Harry called out to her, still laughing. Ana sighed and shook her head, though she couldn't help chuckling as well as she turned the corner.

Such a prat...

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The rest of the week seemed to fly by. Ana began to feel more and more comfortable about her classes, though they weren't completely without awkwardness.

Hermione was still refusing to talk to either her or Harry, choosing to ignore them everywhere, whether it was in lessons or in the common room. Ron hadn't spoken to Harry at all, though he seemed far more reluctant about this than Hermione. He would shoot covert glances at him every so often during lessons, but Harry didn't see them or simply chose not to notice. It seemed that all three of them were too stubborn to try and mend the situation.

Ana still felt awful about everything, but she couldn't force Harry to talk to his friends, so there was really no helping it. She couldn't help feeling a little hurt that Hermione seemed so against even *trying* to get to know her, but at least she had Harry. And the other Gryffindors were slowly warming up to her as well.

Lavender and Parvati continued to be very talkative and friendly with her, though Ana had a feeling that this would be the case with any new girl that arrived at Hogwarts. The urge to gossip was apparently too great for those two.

Course, Ana reminded herself, Hermione knows the truth about me. Wouldn't all of these people treat me exactly the same as her if they knew who I really was?

She pushed the thought to the back of her mind each time it sprang up. It wasn't a very pleasant one, and she didn't want to make things seem worse than they already were.

By the time the weekend rolled around, most of the students were groaning with the amount of homework they'd been assigned. Ana had even more than most people because of her extra lessons, but she didn't really mind. It was exciting to her to be learning real magic, and she was adamant about completing their assignments thoroughly.

Harry, on the other hand, wasn't nearly as thrilled about their work overload as Ana. As usual, he had let it pile up to a ridiculous level by Friday, and just didn't seem to have the heart to begin it quite yet.

He was still feeling a little glum about Ron and Hermione...especially about Ron, though. He couldn't help feeling a bit betrayed. Ana's words kept echoing in his head, but he refused to be the one to break first. *They* were the ones who were wrong, after all...not him.

But, as horrible as not being on speaking terms with Ron and Hermione was, it did give Harry and Ana the chance to spend loads of time together. When they weren't in class, they were either having meals in the Great Hall or spending time lounging out on the grounds near the lake. The summer was nearing an end, and they wanted to take advantage of the nice, warm weather while it lasted.

Harry had managed to convince Ana to put off their Divination and Herbology homework until Sunday, but now that it was Sunday she'd badgered him until he agreed to come to the library with her to get it done, as the common room was much too noisy at the moment.

"Ugh, we have so much to write! I can't believe I let you convince me not to do it until now," she said exasperatedly as they walked through the library's doors.

Harry grimaced. "You sound like Hermione," he grumbled as they found a table and sat down. "*I* can't believe we've got so much

homework already. And I thought fifth year was bad..." he trailed off in disbelief.

Ana sat and began pulling books and parchment out of her bag. "Really? I know there's a lot of it, but I don't mind it too much. It's sort of fun, actually," she said as she flipped open their Herbology book, completely oblivious to Harry's look of horror.

"Fun?" he said finally, overcoming his shock. "Give it a few weeks and you'll be singing a different tune, love," he chuckled, unceremoniously pouring his bags contents out onto the table.

Ana felt her cheeks redden slightly at what Harry had just called her. *Love?* Where had *that* come from?

But as she shot a surreptitious glance at him, she saw that he had hardly noticed and nothing in his demeanor had changed in the slightest. She then figured that it was probably nothing and that she had reacted too quickly, yet again.

She really needed to get those damn butterflies in her stomach under control. They'd been fluttering like crazy all week, and she found that they caused her to grin stupidly every time Harry so much as looked at her. It was utterly embarrassing, but Harry hadn't seemed to notice her increasingly odd behavior around him yet, which she was *very* grateful for.

She was still trying to sort all of these thoughts out in her mind when her eyes caught an unfamiliar book lying open on the table, half hidden beneath piles of Harry's parchment and quills. She stared at it curiously, brushing the papers off it with her hand. She realized immediately that it was not a book at all. It appeared to be a photo album, in fact.

"Harry, what's this?" she asked, not taking her eyes off the album, the people in the photos staring back up at her with smiling faces.

"Hmm?" he said distractedly as he tried mending a quill he had just broken. He looked up at her and only then noticed what she was looking at. His eyes fell on the album, and he furrowed his brows at it in confusion, surprise filling him when he realized what it was.

"How'd that get in there?" he said, more to himself than to Ana. He looked up to find Ana waiting for him to answer, and he cleared his throat quietly. "It's...it's my photo album. Must've thrown it in with my other books on accident," he said, staring down into the faces of his mother and father, a heavy sadness filling him as it always did when he gazed at them.

Ana returned her eyes to the pictures on the page. "These are your parents...aren't they?" she asked quietly, never taking her eyes from the pictures.

Harry swallowed. "Yeah. Hagrid gave me this my first year at Hogwarts."

Ana studied the grinning couple in the photo, smiling slightly as she did. Harry's mother was a beautiful, red-haired woman, and his father could be Harry's replica they were so similar. They looked so happy...

"You look just like him," she said, directing a small smile at him.

Harry grinned too. "Yeah, I guess I do. Sirius tells me that all the time."

"Is that Sirius?" Ana asked, astonished as her eyes fell on the Potter's wedding photo, the familiar dark-haired figure of Harry's godfather catching her eye immediately.

"Yeah," he said, smiling a little as he looked down at his laughing godfather. The picture always made him smile. They were all beaming with joy and happiness. His heart panged at the sight, and he felt the sadness return. He hadn't looked at these in a long time...

Ana glanced over and saw that the pictures seemed to be upsetting him, and she felt a little guilty at the sight of his troubled face. "I'm sorry, Harry. I shouldn't have pried..." she trailed off uncertainly.

He shook his head. "No. No, it's all right...I just...I just haven't seen these in a while, is all," he said softly, still staring down at his laughing parents. "I don't remember them at all. My parents, I mean. These pictures are all I have, really..."

Ana turned pained eyes in his direction, feeling so deeply for him at that moment it almost overwhelmed her.

"They loved you, though," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. She turned her head back to the books in front of her. "That's more than I can say about my parents." She smiled humorlessly.

Harry said nothing, simply choosing to stare at her with sad, green eyes. Ana refused to meet that stare, knowing it would bring to the surface emotions she didn't want to deal with right now. It was easier to ignore them. To pretend like nothing was wrong or had ever been wrong. She shouldn't have said it at all, she thought, and so she quickly made a show of smoothing out the parchment in front of her as though nothing had happened.

She was aware that Harry's stare was still on her, but she focused on the blank page in front of her, her quill clutched in her hand. She turned her eyes to stare at the open page of her Herbology book, but the words might as well have been written in a foreign language. None of them came close to registering in her mind.

"Ana."

His voice was soft and gentle with just the right hint of question. Any other tone, and she probably would have ignored him. But he said her name with such care that she had no choice but to look up from her book.

"It's okay to talk about it, you know," he said softly. "...I know what it's like keeping my feelings to myself, and it's not always the best thing to do. Not when you have someone who'll listen to you if you ever need it. A...a friend," he clarified, his voice still as gentle and caring as before.

Ana stared at him silently for a moment, and then gave a small smile. "You're too astute for your own good, you know that?" she said finally with a small laugh.

Harry smirked, saying nothing. Ana continued to smile and sighed. "Man, I'm really good at ruining a perfectly fine conversation, aren't I?" she asked with a shake of her head.

"No," he said truthfully, giving her a reassuring smile. "But you *are* pretty good at blowing things up," he joked, all seriousness abandoned.

"Hey!" she laughed, hitting him in the arm. "I'll have you know that I haven't blown anything up in a week," she said indignantly, glad that he had changed the subject.

Harry laughed too, and they both fell back to discussing their homework, the sadness of the moment before forgotten. But Ana didn't forget what Harry had told her, and even if she wasn't quite ready to talk about her feelings quite yet, it made her feel better knowing that Harry would be there for her when she was.

His best friends disapproved of her, yes, and her parents were still out there somewhere...But despite all of this, as they sat there quietly discussing the properties of the Gurdyroot, she found herself marveling once more at how she had ever gotten to be so lucky...

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By the time the second week of school rolled around, nearly every single kid at Hogwarts was seen with a Trick Tumbler firmly grasped in their hands. The post on Monday morning consisted almost entirely of owls with brown parcels in tow, and shouts of glee and laughter filled the Great Hall as a sea of orange boxes were uncovered by eager hands.

Dumbledore pretended not to notice the contraption and the sensation it was creating, but Filch had confiscated twelve of them within the first hour of their arrival. People were much more careful about their excitement after that and tried their best to keep the Tumbler's hidden, but the glimmer of gold could be seen shining from more than a few pockets if one were to look carefully.

Harry looked on proudly, silently commending the twins for their smashing success. *They must be ecstatic about it*, he thought with a smile. He'd have to remind himself to send them a congratulations letter and thank them for his own Tumbler, which now sat safely hidden in his school trunk.

For Harry, however, this week was exciting for an entirely different reason. Friday marked the Gryffindor Quidditch Team's first practice of the season, and Harry was Team Captain. He could hardly contain his elated anticipation and found himself unconsciously working out strategies in his head during class, making mental notes about what he felt the team needed to work on.

Ana watched him furiously scribble diagrams of different plays on his History of Magic notes as they sat in class and smiled. He looked so focused. She couldn't wait to see him in action on Friday. He'd asked her if she wanted to come watch, and she jumped at the chance. Besides, it was important to him. She had a feeling he needed a little support anyway, seeing as how he was Captain for the first time. It was a lot of responsibility.

The bell rang and Harry looked up, surprised. Was class over already?

"Welcome back to Earth," Ana laughed next to him.

Harry grinned at her and gathered up his notes hurriedly. Class was over for the day, so they began making their way to the common room. On the way, they passed Dean Thomas in the hall, and Harry stopped to speak to him.

"Practice on Friday, Dean. Don't forget!" Harry said.

Dean looked at Harry a little strangely and gave a small laugh. "Er...right, Harry. I'll be there."

Harry watched him walk off with a confused frown, which only deepened when he heard Ana giggling slightly.

"What was that about?" he asked her. "And what is so funny?"

Ana only laughed harder at this. "Harry, that's the third time this week you've told him about practice. You've been doing it to half the team practically," she said, another small laugh escaping her. She found it to be almost unbearably cute.

Harry reddened instantly. "I have?"

He looked extremely embarrassed, and they began walking once again. "Guess I'm a little excited," he grinned sheepishly, running a hand through his hair.

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Ana smiled mischievously at him, laughing once more when he gave her a look.

They came upon the Fat Lady's portrait finally, and Harry stopped in front of it to say goodbye to Ana, who had to get to her lesson. She walked off, books in arms, and Harry smiled as he watched her go.

He gave the Fat Lady the password and was granted access to the common room. There was a sprinkling of people here and there. Some doing homework, others just idly chatting or playing with their Trick Tumblers.

Harry walked forward, intent on grabbing his favorite spot by the window so he could work out some more plays, but halted abruptly when he saw that someone was already sitting there.

That someone was Ron.

Harry grimaced and turned to just make his way to his dorm instead when he realized with a jolt that he hadn't told Ron about the practice on Friday. He was *certain* of that. He would definitely remember talking to him, since they hadn't spoken since their argument.

But he had a duty as Captain to inform all the players about it, and Ron was Keeper. Best to get it over with quickly, he thought.

He walked up to Ron, who looked as though he was working on their Divination homework, and cleared his throat to get his attention, feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

Ron looked up with a start and gave another start when he saw whom it was. "Harry," he said surprised, and even looking a little hopeful.

Harry kept his face blank and stared at the window. "Practice on Friday. Thought you should know," he said gruffly.

Ron's face fell slightly at this. "Oh...yeah, I know. Dean told me."

"Oh...right," Harry said awkwardly. A pause. "Er...well, that's it. Night then," he said stiffly, turning around. He then felt stupid, since it wasn't even dark outside yet.

"Harry, wait," he heard Ron say. He stopped and turned, waiting.

Ron had risen from his seat at the window and was now looking as though he was struggling with something.

"Well?" Harry asked finally, his voice curt.

Ron looked up at him with uncertainty. Then, he averted his eyes to stare at the floor. "She's all right?" he asked finally, shifting from one foot to the other.

Harry knew immediately that Ron was referring to Ana. He didn't quite know what to make of the question, but answered anyway. "Yeah," he said, furrowing his brows at him. It had caught him off guard.

Ron looked up, his head still hanging slightly. "You trust her?"

Harry's mouth formed a determined line. "I trust her. Why though? I thought you and Hermione had already made up your minds about her," he said bitingly.

Ron looked down again with a grimace. "Well, Hermione has..." he said finally.

Harry felt a stirring of surprise. "And you?" he asked cautiously.

Ron shrugged. "Dunno. Haven't exactly gotten the chance to know her yet."

Harry frowned. "Gee, wonder why?" he asked sarcastically.

Ron sighed. "Look, Harry, I know I was being a git. I'm sorry, okay? I thought about it and realized it was wrong to say you should stay away from her. You obviously aren't going to listen anyway..." he said, a grin creeping across his face.

Harry shifted slightly, not really knowing what to make of what Ron was saying. He was apologizing?

"What about Hermione?" he asked. "Won't she be mad at you for talking to me again? I'm being thick for being Ana's friend, after all," he said, the sarcasm creeping back into his voice.

Ron frowned slightly. "Hermione doesn't control me Harry—"

"Could've fooled me," Harry mumbled.

Ron chose to ignore this, however. "Look, she has her own thoughts about it, and I have mine, okay? I...I just think I should give her a chance, I guess," he shrugged and paused. He seemed to think for a moment before speaking once more. "And it's me who was being thick, not you," he said with a reluctant grin.

Harry felt a grin come across his face as well at this. "You? Thick? Never..."

Ron laughed and shook his head. "So...truce?" he said finally, holding out his hand to Harry.

Harry stared at it for a moment. "You'll apologize to Ana?" he asked finally.

Ron hesitated, but nodded immediately when Harry gave him a hard look. "Yes. Course I will," he said, his hand still outstretched.

Harry studied him for a second...two...three...and then smiled. "Truce," he said, shaking the proffered hand.

They both felt immediately as though a weight had been lifted off their shoulders and fell into a conversation as if it were the most familiar thing in the world. They grabbed a table and did some catching up, talking about everything from their summers to Trelawney's homework, to Quidditch.

It felt good to talk to Ron again. Harry hadn't realized how much he'd missed it until now.

After a while, they both pulled out their Divination homework, ready to fall into their usual routine of just making it up as they went along. Ron was drawing a few pictures of some rather demented looking birds on a section of his parchment. His tongue stuck out slightly from the side of his mouth as he tried getting the wings right.

"Bugger all, what the hell have birds got to do with my future anyway!" he exclaimed suddenly, throwing down his quill in a fit of frustration. "Trelawney's really outdone herself this time," he mumbled agitatedly as he stared down at his pitiful representations of birds in flight.

Harry laughed and looked down at his own less-than-marvelous drawings. "It is pretty bad. I'd take the crystal ball over this stuff any day."

Ron folded his arms across his chest, frowning. "Maybe we can just get Hermione to do it for us," he said without thinking. When he realized what he'd done, however, he sunk a little in his chair. Harry's hand had tightened slightly around his quill, but his face remained otherwise devoid of emotion.

"Where is Hermione anyway?" Harry asked in the tense silence that followed Ron's words. His voice had just a hint of bitterness to it.

"Er...I think she said she had to go to the library for her Arithmancy homework," Ron replied, rather uncomfortably. The moment had immediately turned quite awkward, and both boys sat there stiffly for a moment before the sound of the portrait hole opening interrupted them.

Ana walked into the now nearly deserted common room, her eyes scanning it for Harry's familiar face. When she saw him in the corner

near the window, she smiled and started making her way towards him. It was only until she was halfway there that she noticed Ron sitting at the table as well. Surprised, she slowed to a stop.

“Oh. Hi,” she said awkwardly.

Harry smiled at her, and Ron straightened a little in his seat, glancing from Ana to Harry unsurely. Ana saw this and took it to mean that she wasn't welcome. At least not by Ron. He seemed a little uncomfortable, and from the looks of it, he and Harry had actually been speaking to one another. She didn't want to mess that up.

“Erm...I'll just be going then, I guess,” she said finally, turning towards the stairs.

“Ana wait!” Harry said quickly, standing up. “It's okay,” he smiled as she turned back to him.

Ana stared from Harry to Ron uncertainly. “It is?” she asked hesitantly, her eyes now trailing to the latter of them.

“Yeah. Come on,” Harry said to her before moving back to the table. He pulled up a chair for Ana and sat down again.

Ana sat, her books still in her arms and smiled nervously at Ron. Ron just sat there silently for a moment until Harry gave him an expectant look. Ron then cleared his throat and fiddled with his quill.

“Er...look, Ana, I...I wanted to...erm...to—“

Ana smiled warmly at him and cut him off. “It's okay,” she said kindly, knowing he was trying to apologize. “I probably would have done the same thing if it were my best friend.”

“Er...right,” Ron said with a smile, looking very much relieved.

Harry grinned at her as she set her books down and took out her own quill and parchment.

“So what are we doing, Divination homework?” she asked as she opened her book. It was almost as if nothing had happened at all, and things had never been awkward between them.

Harry looked at her fondly, marveling at how resilient she was. How she could forgive so easily. He realized then and there that he could probably learn a lot from her. They all could.

“Yeah,” he said, shaking himself out of his daze. “Like my drawings?” he asked her, pretending to be serious.

Ana glanced over at them. “Oh...uh, well,” she started, trying to determine if she should tell him the truth or not.

Harry immediately started laughing, and Ana grinned in relief, realizing he’d been joking around, as usual. Ron laughed too and pushed his own drawings forward.

“How bout mine? Personally I think I’ve never drawn better,” he said smugly, a grin creeping across his face.

Ana laughed even harder when she saw Ron’s birds and had to hold her stomach from the effort.

“Do us a favor, Ron. Never ever show us any of your other works of art,” Harry said, chuckling.

“Come on. They’re not that bad, are they?” Ron said, studying his drawings again.

“That one has a wing growing out of its head, Ron,” Harry said, pointing to the offending bird.

“So?” Ron said, peering down at the bird. “Maybe it’s off to join the circus. You don’t know.”

A peal of bright laughter rang from Ana yet again, and this time Harry and Ron both joined in. Their fun was interrupted, however, when the portrait hole opened yet again, and Hermione came walking in. She halted abruptly when she saw them, her eyes traveling from Ron, to Ana, to Harry, and then back to Ron. She looked shocked for a

moment, but quickly recovered and sent Ron a steely glare, ignoring completely Harry and Ana.

“Sorry to spoil your *fun*, but we have Prefect duty Ron,” she said, a hint of bitterness in her voice as she said the word “fun.”

Ron looked like a kid who’d just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Ana shifted in her seat uncomfortably, and Harry had stiffened slightly at Hermione’s entrance.

With a gulp, Ron gathered up his things and quickly mumbled the two of them goodnight before going to join Hermione, who had just whipped back around towards the portrait hole. He followed her out into the hallway where they walked in tense silence for a while. Finally, Ron couldn’t take it anymore and turned to her.

“Listen, Hermione, I’m sorry, okay? I know you think Harry’s being an idiot, but that doesn’t mean I have to—”

“I’m not stopping you from speaking to him, Ron,” she interrupted testily, quickening her steps. “You’re perfectly capable of making your own decisions and if you don’t have a problem with Harry putting his life in even more danger than it’s already in, then that’s just fine with me. I could care less,” she said huffily.

“Hermione,” Ron said impatiently, hurrying to keep up with her. “Hermione, stop!” he said finally, grabbing her arm and bringing her furious pace to a halt.

She wrenched her arm out of his grasp and folded them in front of her, giving Ron a hard look of expectancy.

Ron sighed. “Hermione, this is ridiculous. Why are you acting like this? Harry’s our friend—”

“Yes. Yes he is, Ron,” she cut in. “That’s why he needs to stop being so selfish. That girl is going to get him into trouble!”

“Selfish? Saving someone’s life and being their friend is selfish?” Ron asked incredulously.

“When it’s ‘The Boy Who Lived’ that we’re talking about, yes, it’s selfish,” she said, clenching her jaw.

Ron’s look hardened at this. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hermione sighed, dropping her arms in frustration. “Don’t you get it, Ron? Voldemort’s back. And Harry...” she trailed off as if searching for the right words to say. Finally she dropped her shoulders, abandoning her rigid stance in a defeated manner. “Harry’s the only one who can stop him,” she whispered sadly. “Not me, not you, not even Dumbledore, Ron. Harry.”

Ron softened, not really knowing what to say to this. A part of him knew Hermione was right, but another part of him didn’t want to believe it.

“Look...I don’t mind you talking to Harry, Ron. Really, I don’t. I just...I just can’t. I can’t pretend like everything is okay, and that being friends with Ana, no matter how nice she is, is a smart thing. There’s too much at stake now. Harry needs to realize that,” Hermione said softly, but with a conviction that told Ron she wouldn’t budge from her opinions.

“But...” Ron began, looking a little lost. “But Hogwarts is safe. There’s no harm in Harry being friends with Ana here. They were in Diagon Alley when they almost got killed,” Ron said.

Hermione gave him a small, humorless smile. “Normally I would agree with you, Ron, but the past five years here haven’t exactly been danger free for us, have they? Anything but, in fact,” she added grimly.

Ron opened his mouth as if to argue with her, but immediately closed it again. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, she was right. Danger had found its way across their paths here at Hogwarts numerous times in the past. He couldn’t deny that.

Hermione smiled at him, genuinely this time and took his hand in her own. “Come on,” she said softly, tugging him forward. “Let’s just try to get through one thing at a time, all right? I don’t want to fight with you, too,” she said, looking at him sadly.

Ron warmed at the look and squeezed her hand tighter in his own.
“Me neither, Hermione.”

She smiled at him again, and they walked down the dark hallways in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

Ron understood why Hermione felt the way she did. He was scared for Harry too, after all. He was scared for all of them. But he also knew that Harry needed him. He needed support to help him bear the burden of being the one wizard on Earth that could stop Voldemort.

And Ron needed him, too. Harry was his best mate in the entire world besides Hermione, and he couldn't cut it off so easily. He'd done that in the past and it had been some of the worst times of his life.

He'd just have to hope that Hermione was wrong about the situation somehow. That nothing would come of Harry's new friendship with Ana. That this year would be an uneventful one.

But as they passed by the windows in the hallway that gave views of the still, dark night beyond, he somehow felt that there was no way they could ever be so lucky.

[illegible]

Ana watched as Ron and Hermione disappeared out through the portrait hole and then turned her attention back to Harry. He sat there staring blankly at his parchment, a pensive look on his face.

"I take it Hermione isn't as keen as Ron is to associate with me, then?" she said finally in a small, quiet voice, trying to smile but failing miserably at it.

Harry broke from his trance, and his green eyes softened as they looked at her. "It's not you, Ana. It's me," he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "At least Ron's come to his senses."

"I'm glad you two made up, Harry," Ana said, smiling genuinely now. "I can't tell you what a relief that is."

Harry grinned. "You and me both. It'll definitely make Quidditch practice a lot less awkward, that's for sure."

Ana laughed. "Everything's Quidditch with you, isn't it Potter?" she said in a joking manner.

Harry flashed her a charming smile and winked. "Course it is, love. I am Captain, after all. Did I mention that?" he asked in mock arrogance, still grinning like an idiot.

"Only about thirty-seven times," Ana said with a laugh.

Harry frowned. "Only thirty-seven? Well, I'll have to amend *that* immediately..."

Ana rolled her eyes and chuckled. "You are the world's biggest prat," she shook her head, a grin still plastered on her face. She picked up her quill and thrust Harry's own one into his hands.

"Homework time," she commanded with smiling eyes.

Harry groaned. "But—"

"No buts, Harry," Ana said firmly. "This is due tomorrow."

Harry pouted and watched as Ana began writing on her parchment. He threw a reluctant glance at his own parchment and sighed. Suddenly his eyes caught on a book that was among the many now strewn across the table, and he grinned mischievously.

"Hey look! It's my copy of *Quidditch Through The Ages*! Speaking of Quidditch, did I mention that I'm Team Cap—"

"Harry!" Ana said, cutting him off exasperatedly.

Harry grinned at her before turning back to his homework. "Thirty-eight," he murmured triumphantly, but Ana heard him all the same. She threw him a tiresome glance, but found it very difficult to keep the small smile from springing to her face.

He really was a prat.

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Friday couldn't come soon enough for Harry, and when it did, he was nearly giddy with excitement. Ana watched in amusement as he fidgeted in every class, sitting so close to the edge of his seat she was surprised he didn't fall off. When the final bell finally rang, he had nearly sprinted out the door of their class before realizing he'd left Ana behind.

She walked out of the door, laughing. "Go on Harry. I'll catch up with you at the field."

Harry hesitated. "You sure?"

Ana gave him a smile. "Yes, I'm sure. Now go! You're Team Captain after all..." she said with a wink.

Harry beamed at her. "That's right, I am, aren't I?"

Ana gave him a shove and laughed again. "Go!"

He didn't need to be told again, and Ana watched as he ran down the hallways to go get the equipment for the practice. She walked out into the sunshine soaked grounds, slowly making her way to the Quidditch stands where she'd sit and watch Harry's first practice. She was very glad that she'd been able to convince Professor Shrublock to postpone her private lesson until later that night. She didn't want to miss this.

When she got to the pitch, she climbed the stairs and took a seat on one of the stands. She noticed that Harry was already on the field setting up (how he'd managed *that* she had no idea), and she gave him a smile and a wave when he looked her way. He returned it and went back to taking the balls out of the case. Ron appeared shortly after, and the rest of the team quickly followed.

She watched as Harry gave them all orders about what to do, and the team soared up into their positions. They played a practice game, with Harry blowing the whistle every now and then to correct

something. Ana watched in fascination as they played, marveling at the skill the game required.

When it was over, she descended the stairs to meet Harry on the field. He was with Ron and was saying goodbye to the other players as they made their way back to the castle.

“Good practice, everyone! I expect to see more of that next time!” he called to their retreating backs. Ana didn’t think his smile could be any bigger.

“Great job, guys,” she smiled as she walked up to them both.

“Thanks!” Ron said, smiling too. He’d managed to block almost every goal at his Keeper position.

Harry grinned at her, feeling very proud of himself. “Aw...thanks Ana! Want to give me a hug?” he asked, grinning evilly. He was drenched in sweat.

“No way, Harry! Stay away from me,” she warned, backing up slightly.

Harry’s grin just grew at this as he neared her slowly. “What’s the matter, Ana? I thought I did a good job. Surely that merits a hug, at least, right?”

Ana threw him a murderous look and backed up more. “Harry, I swear, if you—“

She shrieked as Harry lunged for her. She dove behind Ron in an attempt to hide herself. Ron was laughing hysterically, and Harry still had that predatory grin on his face.

“You might as well just let him do it, Ana. He’s gonna get you eventually, anyway, trust me,” Ron said through his laughter.

“Better listen to him, Ana,” Harry said as he circled Ron. “Come and get it...”

Ana was now laughing too and determinedly keeping Ron between her and Harry. "I'll never surrender, Potter!" she cried with mock bravery.

Harry faked to the right, making Ana go left and grabbed her around the waist as she screamed in surprise. He hugged her tight in his unrelenting hold as Ana laughed and tried unsuccessfully to pry his arms from her.

"Told you," Ron said with a shake of his head.

"Harry! Ewww...so gross," she said as he finally let go of her. Her robes were now wet as well. "I hate you..." she grumbled as they began walking towards the castle.

Harry grinned and slung an arm over her shoulders playfully. "Liar. You know you love me," he laughed.

She felt her cheeks burn slightly and turned her face away, smiling a little. "Whatever..."

They all made their way up to the common room, Harry and Ron going to shower, and Ana going to change before her lesson now that her current clothes were soaked. When they were done, they all met back in the common room, which was fairly empty due to the fact most students were down at dinner.

They stepped through the portrait hole, and Ron turned to them to say goodbye.

"Hermione's meeting me in the Great Hall," he explained, looking a little sheepish. He was still trying to get used to the fact that his two best friends in the whole world weren't speaking to each other. The situation definitely wasn't without its awkwardness.

Harry was just about to wave him goodbye so he could walk Ana to her lesson when he felt a sudden and searing pain in his scar.

"Ahh..." he hissed, his hand instinctively moving to his forehead. The pain was immense, almost bringing him to his knees. Everything went

black, and he could hear an angry, snakelike voice in his head...it was yelling something...

Ana looked at him in alarm and grabbed his arm to steady him. "Harry? Oh my god, what's wrong?" she asked frantically.

Ron rushed to Harry's side and held him up too. "Harry!" he said in a fearful tone.

But all Harry heard was a buzzing in his ear and the persistent voice laced with fury, his surroundings hazy before him. He slumped helplessly against the two of them. Ana looked terrified.

"Harry!" she said urgently. When he didn't respond, she looked to Ron. "What's wrong with him?" she asked. Her hands were shaking.

"It's his scar," Ron explained quickly, grabbing Harry by the shoulders and shaking him a little. "Harry! Come on, mate, snap out of it," he commanded.

Harry's hand dug into his damp hair and his surroundings slowly came into focus once more. He was aware that both Ron and Ana had a hold of him, and that there was a dull throbbing in his scar. He blinked a few times and swallowed. His throat was dry and his forehead was covered in a sheen of sweat.

"What happened?" he asked hoarsely, straightening against the wall of the corridor, feeling tired and weak.

Ron let go of him, but Ana's grip on his arm never lessened. "Y-you almost collapsed," she said, the fear evident in her voice.

Ron was looking at him grimly. "Your...your scar," he trailed off.

Harry looked to both of them and was brought back to what he had felt. He nodded, casting his eyes downward in deep thought. "It's never been that bad before...at least not here it hasn't," he said quietly, frowning deeply.

"Hogwarts you mean?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded again. His thoughts returned to that night in the graveyard when Voldemort had touched his scar. The unbearable agony that coursed through him. This time wasn't quite as bad, but it was close enough to cause him serious worry. Then, with a start, he remembered the voice he had heard...

"Voldemort," he whispered, almost to himself.

Ron flinched and Ana looked even more alarmed than before. "What?" she asked him.

Harry looked up at her. "I...I heard him. His voice...in my head," he said slowly, as if trying to remember exactly. "He was angry about something. It...it sounded like he was yelling at someone..."

“Who?” Ron asked with a gulp.

Harry tore his eyes from Ana's worried ones to meet Ron's. "Dunno," he whispered. "But whoever they are, I'm glad I'm not them right now," he said darkly.

A silence fell over the three of them. Ron shuddered. Ana continued to stare at Harry, who was gazing blankly at the stone wall before him. A cold feeling of discomfort overcame her, though she didn't know why...

[illegible]

But there was a very good reason for Ana's discomfort. A very good reason indeed.

Far away, at an undisclosed location, Alecto Carrows was cowering in fear and humiliation before the Darkest wizard that ever lived. His wife, Andromeda, stood erect beside him, her head bowed in respect.

The man known by the name of Lord Voldemort, the name that struck fear into the hearts of even the bravest of men, was *seething* with anger.

“Fools!” he hissed toward the couple, clenching his fists in rage. “How could you allow this to happen?”

“My Lord,” Alecto began, his voice shaking, but only slightly. “We have been searching everywhere—“

“Yes, and wasting precious time for nothing! She could ruin everything,” the Dark Lord raged, his red eyes flashing dangerously. “We have more important matters to worry about than a *girl*. You, both of you, are integral in my plans. If you are taken out it will destroy everything! They’ve found the cabin, already—“

“But,” Alecto cut in. “My Lord, that is impossible. She could hardly have led them to it—“

With a flick of his hand, Voldemort had Alecto writhing on the floor in pain before he could even finish the sentence.

“Of course they’ve found the cabin you fool! Have you learned nothing in the years under my service? Have I taught you nothing!” he yelled, causing both of the Carrows to flinch. “Both of you have been faithful to me for many years now. For that, you are lucky. I say this once, and once only,” he neared them both, his voice lowering to a dangerous level.

“Find her and kill her. Or I’ll kill you.”

Alecto and Andromeda both looked up in alarm at this. “But, My Lord, surely—“ Andromeda began, but she was cut off sharply by Voldemort.

“You have brought shame to us. To me. It would be a serious and difficult task to replace you, but do not think for a moment that I am incapable of doing so. If you cannot undo this...this...humiliation, then I will see no wrong in finishing you both for good. This girl is a trifle! I should not even have to waste my time worrying about such matters! It’s despicable,” he seethed. “She is a liability now thanks to your incompetence, and I cannot afford any weaknesses! Not one! Do you understand me?” he yelled.

“Yes, My Lord,” the Carrows said in unison, their heads bowed. A thick and terrifying silence fell over them all as the couple awaited their orders.

“Get out of my sight,” the Dark Lord said in a quiet voice laced with hatred.

The Carrows didn’t need to be told twice.

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AN: Gah! I know, I know. You can throw things if you want to! I deserve it for my atrocious lack of update skills lately. I’m so sorry guys! School has been kicking my butt lately. At least this chapters fairly long, though, right?

Anyways, I have a couple of questions for you. Is this story getting boring? What about Harry and Ana’s relationship? Is it too fast? Too slow? Are you aching for some romance? Really, any insight you guys can give me would be immensely helpful and not to mention appreciated.

I would love to hear your feedback. Reviews keep me going! Okay, done now. Thanks guys for reading (and putting up with me :)). Sorry again for the late update. I’ll try and do better next time. Check my profile page for news and stuff. I’ll post my progress there so you guys won’t be in the dark completely. All right, I’m really done now. Have a great day!

Chapter 15

The next few weeks seemed to pass by at a steady pace. Ana continued her lessons and was growing increasingly more comfortable with performing magic. One might even have said that she was getting the hang of it. It helped, though, that she practiced often in her free time. Harry (for completely selfish reasons, of course) wasn't too thrilled about this, wanting to do anything *but* schoolwork, but he helped her along with it when she needed it all the same.

Harry had determinedly kept quiet about his scar ever since the night it had nearly brought him to his knees in the hallway. Ron and Ana exchanged worried looks about this, but it was Ana who seemed the most concerned. Ron shrugged it off after a while. It was nothing new to Harry, he knew, and if Harry didn't want to talk about it he wasn't going to push him. He'd been treading sensitive ground with him because of Hermione anyway. She still refused to talk to Harry.

Ana, however, could not shrug it off so easily. And that cold feeling had failed to dissipate over time. She was extremely worried about him.

However, what Ana didn't know, and what Harry refused to let show in any way, was that he was still very much troubled by the incident with his scar. It had been a very hard thing to forget, in fact. He caught himself drifting off in class sometimes, remembering the searing pain that he had felt and the voice that he had heard.

Voldemort.

Harry had heard his voice in his head before, that was for certain, but this time had been really bad. He wondered what it meant. Whether it was a good or bad thing that the Dark Lord's voice had been filled with such fury. It worried him, but he didn't want to express it to anyone. Least of all Ana.

She had been giving him concerned looks ever since that night in the hallway, and Harry could tell she wanted to ask him about it but didn't have the nerve. He pretended like nothing was wrong. That it was a

completely normal occurrence. Which wasn't a complete lie he supposed...

But Ana wasn't fooled. She knew Harry was struggling inwardly about it. The way he stared off into space sometimes just told her that he was reliving that *awful* moment outside the common room. She'd been so terrified. The sight of Harry slumped over her and Ron like that, completely helpless....

She shuddered just thinking about it.

It was on a slightly chilly day in October when Ana finally brought it up again. It was the weekend, and having nothing better to do, they both found themselves outside underneath their usual tree near the lake. Harry stood, absentmindedly skipping rocks across the glassy surface. Ana sat with her back against the tree, a book propped up on her knees. But reading was the last thing on her mind right now.

She stared at Harry, the worried look returning to her gray eyes. She needed to ask him. She couldn't stand this constant state of wondering whether or not he was all right. Whether he needed to talk about it or not. So, with a sigh, she steeled herself and spoke quietly.

"Harry?"

Harry threw his last rock and watched it skip across the surface, sending circles of ripples in all directions. "Hmmm?" he asked finally, turning to face her.

Upon seeing her face, he could immediately tell that she was struggling with something. "Ana? What is it?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

She bit her lip, and Harry's eyes were drawn to them. He suddenly had a hard time concentrating on anything else. "Don't do that," he groaned quietly, turning his head away.

She looked up at him in surprise. "Do what?"

The only drawback of getting more and more comfortable around Ana these past few weeks for Harry had been the fact that he couldn't get

her out of his head half the time. It had provided him a welcome distraction from thoughts about Voldemort, but thoughts of her were almost as torturous. The last thing he needed was to be thinking about her lips...

Harry chanced a glance at her and shook his head, clearing his throat as he did. "Nothing. What was it you were saying?" he said quickly.

Ana looked at him strangely, but continued on. "I...I was just wondering if you were all right," she said softly, piercing his eyes with her own. "You've been...distant, lately."

Harry frowned and tore his eyes away from her own. "I'm fine," he said, perhaps a bit too stiffly.

"Harry. Is...is it your scar?" she asked timidly.

Harry sighed and moved towards Ana in a defeated manner. "Scoot over," he said.

Ana did, and Harry sat next to her, leaning his head against the bark as he did. He turned his head to meet her worried gaze and gave her a small smile. "I'm okay, Ana. Really I am."

He was trying to make her feel better. But she wasn't concerned with herself at the moment. It was only he. "Does it happen often?" she asked, her voice small.

Harry looked at her for a moment, debating on what to tell her. He was touched that she seemed so genuinely worried about him, but he didn't want her to worry. That was his problem. But he supposed she deserved to know something, at least.

"Every now and then," he said reluctantly.

"What does it mean?"

Harry hesitated. "We're...Voldemort and I...we're connected, somehow."

When Ana gave him a puzzled look, he continued. "My scar hurts whenever he feels a strong emotion, or when he's near me. Side effect, I guess," he shrugged, tearing his eyes away to gaze out over the lake.

"And...and that night...you said he was angry?" she asked, trying to sort it out in her mind.

Harry nodded, the voice returning from his memory. He immediately tried to think of something else. He turned and gave her a reassuring smile.

"It's fine Ana, really. This isn't the first time its happened, and it won't be the last. It's just something I need to deal with. That's all," he told her gently, praying she'd find this an acceptable answer.

She stared at him for a moment, and then slowly nodded, turning her eyes to the horizon. Harry gave an inward sigh of relief. He didn't want to tell her the real reason behind his connection with Voldemort.

The prophecy.

No. He wouldn't tell her about that. He hadn't even wanted to tell Ron and Hermione about it. It would just make Ana even more worried and scared, and he didn't even know quite what to think of it yet. A part of him didn't want to think about it at all.

Yes. Best not to tell her.

"So you're coming to the first Quidditch game, right?" he asked with a smile, wanting very much to change the subject.

Ana turned to him with a grin. "Of course I am. How could I miss you in your first game?"

Harry grinned now, too. "You couldn't. I'm far too attractive in my uniform for you to miss something like that," he said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Ana laughed and swatted him. "Gods, could your head be any bigger, Potter? As if I care what you look like in those silly uniforms anyway."

This was a complete lie, of course. Ana secretly happened to believe Harry looked *extremely* attractive in his Quidditch uniform. But she'd rather die than tell him that.

Harry laughed. "Oh, the lies you tell, Ana. You know you can't resist me in that thing," he said, his voice deep and far too enticing for Ana's liking.

She blushed and pushed her hair behind her ears, suddenly feeling very nervous for some reason. And those damn butterflies had come back...

"I'm cold. Are you cold? I'm cold. Maybe we should go back now. What do you think? I think we should maybe head back," she said in a rushed voice, standing up abruptly.

"Oh...okay. Sure," Harry said, confused. He rose and threw her a searching look. Ana started walking towards the castle hurriedly, and Harry soon fell into pace beside her.

"You all right?" he asked her.

"Fine," Ana said quickly, giving him a bright smile and hugging her arms against herself.

She knew she must look like a complete idiot right now, but she was having a hard time acting any other way. Every time she looked at Harry lately her heart would start fluttering crazily for some reason. What could it mean? It didn't happen around anyone else...

"You sure?" Harry asked, watching her closely as they made their way into the castle. She seemed flustered.

"Uh-huh," she nodded, keeping her eyes fixed on the stairs as they climbed up towards Gryffindor tower.

Harry looked at her for a moment, trying to decide if this was an acceptable answer, but soon gave up. She seemed okay...even if she had been acting rather strange around him lately.

They stepped into the common room only to be stopped by a throng of students who were currently crowded around the bulletin board, talking excitedly. Ana frowned slightly and turned to Harry.

"What is it?" she asked, trying to see over everyone's head.

Harry, being much taller than Ana, had an easier time at this and was met with a familiar sight.

"Hogsmeade," he said finally, turning to Ana with a smile.

"What?" she asked, confused.

"It's the wizarding village not far from here. We get to have trips there every so often. It's a pretty cool place," he told her, smiling. "Guess the first one is this weekend."

"Oh," Ana said, nodding.

"Should be fun. You wanna go?" he asked, turning to her with a grin, but it was quickly wiped from his face as he realized something. "Oh..." he said.

"What is it?" Ana asked, furrowing her brows at him.

"Uh...you, uh, you need permission from a parent or guardian in order to be allowed to go..." he trailed off. How could he have forgotten that? He himself hadn't even been able to go until Sirius signed the slip for him. Ana didn't have anyone to do that for her, though.

"Oh," she said softly, disappointed. "Well, that's okay, I guess. I doubt I would've been allowed to go anyways, even with permission. After what happened at Diagon Alley..." she said with a shrug.

Harry hadn't even thought about that. Of course Ana couldn't go to Hogsmeade. She could get hurt. He felt stupid and selfish for even feeling sad about her not being able to go. There was no way he'd allow her to, anyway. He didn't want a repeat of what happened before...

"You're right. Bad idea," he said with a firm nod. "That's okay. We'll have our own fun here."

Ana looked up at him, confused. "We?"

Harry grinned at her. "You didn't think I'd let you stay here all alone when everyone else is at Hogsmeade, did you?"

Ana opened, and then closed her mouth. "But...but Harry, you should go! I don't want to be the reason you miss out on a fun day," she said with a frown.

"It wouldn't be a fun day without you, though," he said genuinely and so quietly she wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. She blushed immediately. He smiled at the sight.

"Don't worry, we'll have fun. I promise," he winked at her, the sincerity in his voice replaced by a playful tone.

Ana couldn't help grinning like an idiot for what felt like the hundredth time in the past couple of days. She was suddenly very much looking forward to the Hogsmeade trip. She wouldn't be going of course, but oddly enough she couldn't be happier about it.

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When the day of the Hogsmeade trip finally came, Ana awoke with a feeling of excitement. Just her and Harry today...

She rose, stopping mid-stretch when her eyes traveled to the dorm window. They widened, and she ran to it to get a better look of the grounds outside. They were completely covered in snow.

"Wow..." she breathed.

It was beautiful. A storm must have come through in the night. It had been threatening to for the past couple of days, and it looked as though it had finally happened. A bright smile lit Ana's features as she stared out over it. Beautiful.

The Great Hall was fairly empty when she entered it. Most of the students were hovering around near the entrance doors, too eager to be on their way to the village to stop and take the time to eat. Ana joined Harry at the table, where she noticed him reading a letter he'd just received from the morning post.

"Hey," she said, sitting down.

Harry glanced up, surprised, but smiled when he saw who it was. "Hey," he said, folding the letter up and laying it down.

Ana stared at it curiously and Harry grinned. "Sirius," he whispered in explanation.

"Oh! How is he?" she asked eagerly as she reached for some toast.

"Good. He asked about you..."

Ana looked up in surprise. "He did?"

Harry laughed. "Yeah. Wanted to know how you've been getting along."

Ana felt a smile crawl across her face. It touched her that Harry's godfather would care about her, of all people. "That's sweet. You must tell him hello for me. He must be so bored there with no sword fighting lessons to teach," she said with a small smile, a sympathetic tone coming to her voice.

"Oh, I'm sure he's more than busy with all the Order stuff. They've been having more meetings than ever, recently," he said grimly.

Ana turned to look at him and frowned. She wanted to ask if there had been any news about her parents, but found it difficult to form the words for some reason. She almost didn't want to know. Ignorance is bliss, after all.

Harry noticed her inner struggle immediately. He looked at her, sympathy in his green eyes. "Nothing, Ana," he whispered apologetically.

She met his stare and knew at once that he was referring to the search for her parents. She nodded mutely and put down her toast. She'd suddenly lost her appetite.

Harry saw this and knew it was time to get started on their fun day. Better not to think about murderous parents at the moment...

"Looks like everyone's leaving," he said as he stared towards the doors. Sure enough, throngs of students could be seen filing out the entrance doors. Harry caught a brief glimpse of red hair and knew it was Ron, with Hermione nearby no doubt. They were off to Hogsmeade with everyone else too, it seemed.

"Come on. Let's go," Harry said to her, rising. She followed as they walked out of the Great Hall and into the hallways of the ground floor. "So, what do you wanna do today?" Harry asked, turning to her.

Ana stopped and found her eyes drifting towards the windows providing a view of the white grounds outside. She smiled slightly at the sight. Harry followed her gaze and grinned when he saw what had captured her attention.

"That," Harry said, still looking outside, "is a great idea."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her along towards the entrance doors. "Woah! Harry, wait, what?" Ana asked hurriedly.

"It's the year's first snow. We'd be daft if we didn't go out and enjoy it," Harry told her as they walked into the sharp air outside. "Bit early this year," Harry said, almost to himself, as he looked out over the white snow with a smile. "Come on," he said, trudging forward.

Ana followed and was once again awed by the beauty of the snow-covered Hogwarts. She didn't think the place could get any more magnificent than it already was, but apparently she was wrong. The pure white color of the fresh snow nearly blinded her. She was glad she thought to bring her winter cloak with her to breakfast. The air was biting, but at least there was no wind. For that she was grateful.

They walked towards the lake through the fluffy, fresh, powder snow, both with smiles on their faces. They fell into everyday conversation, talking about their classes, the coming Quidditch match, and so on.

Unsurprisingly, they ended up where they usually did on their outside excursions: underneath their tree by the lake. A comfortable silence fell over them both as their own separate thoughts carried them away.

Ana found her own drifting to something she'd been pondering about more and more of late. The future. Her lessons were going well, but it occurred to her that school only lasted so long. There was a world outside of Hogwarts. A world she knew nothing about.

What would she do when school ended? Where would she go? A small frown marred her face as she wondered about this. She turned to study Harry then, who stood so confidently as he stared out over the lake. Looking at him, one would think he had not a care in the world.

"Harry?" she asked in a small voice, careful not to disrupt the peaceful moment too much.

He turned to her, a smile still adorning his handsome face. "Yeah?"

Ana hesitated. "Have you ever thought about what you're going to do? After Hogwarts I mean?" she asked finally.

Harry's smile faded a little, as if he hadn't been expecting the question. He'd thought about it. Tons of times. But lately it had become more and more apparent that there might not be life after Hogwarts. Not if Voldemort had anything to say about it. But he didn't want to think about that, let alone say it aloud to Ana.

"Er...yeah. I think I might want to be an Auror. If I can, that is. It's sort of a tough thing to achieve," he said instead. He walked towards the tree slowly and leaned against it as his thoughts about this carried him away.

Ana stood near the lake, smiling as she thought of "Harry the Auror." It wasn't all that difficult to imagine.

Harry continued to stare at the ground, lost in thought. He broke from his trance, however, when he was quite suddenly struck in the shoulder with a wad of snow. If he had been paying closer attention, he would have realized that his leaning against the tree had disturbed it and caused some snow to fall from one of its many branches, but Harry had been too deep in thought. He looked up, surprised, and caught sight of Ana's grinning face, immediately assuming it had been her who had thrown it.

He looked at her in disbelief for a moment, but overcame his shock quickly and grinned devilishly as he bent down to gather his own snow missile. He sent it hurling through the air unceremoniously where it hit Ana's head with a '*splish*'.

She looked at him in complete and utter shock. "What was that for?" she asked, a little angrily.

"You threw it at me first!" he said defensively, grinning like a fool. Snow still clung to Ana's long, dark hair.

She gaped at him. "I did not! The tree probably threw it at you!"

Harry scoffed. "Don't go blaming the tree. What did it ever do to you?"

Ana's mouth hung open as a grin spread across her face. "Oh, you are so dead."

They both scrambled at the same time to gather as much snow as possible into their hands, laughing hysterically as they sailed it at each other. Ana screamed and tried to dodge Harry's snowballs but he was making them much quicker than she was. She was being pelted by them until she managed to form a perfect one of her own, tossing it at Harry with a might throw. It hit him directly in the face.

Harry staggered dramatically. "Oh...you killed me," he said, clutching his head jokingly. He fell back and landed with a thump on the white snow, his arms thrown out wide as he lay on the ground.

Ana laughed in pure joy at her victory and watched as Harry sprawled out on the ground before her. She was still laughing when he began to move his arms and legs over the snow.

“What the heck are you doing?” she asked in amusement as she watched him.

Harry continued to swipe his limbs across the powdery snow. "Making a snow angel," he said as if it were obvious.

Ana laughed. “A what?”

“A snow angel,” he repeated, stopping his movement when she continued to stare at him blankly. “You do know what a snow angel is, don’t you?” She said nothing, still staring at him confused. Harry scoffed. “What?! How can you have never made a snow angel?” he asked in disbelief.

Ana shrugged. "I...I don't know. I was never really allowed to play in the snow much, I guess," she said softly.

Harry softened. He sat up and reached out for her hand. "Come here..." he said, grinning slightly as he tugged her down to the ground next to him. She laughed as she hit the soft snow. "Let me show you how it's done. You are in luck milady, for I just so happen to be the master of snow angels," he winked.

And as they laughed and played side by side on the fresh snow, Ana suddenly felt grateful towards her parents for the very first time. Who knew making snow angels could be so fun? And having Harry be the one to teach her...

Well, it just made the moment that much sweeter.

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“What do you think about this one?”

Ron tore his gaze from the shop window that gave a perfect view of the bustling street outside to meet Hermione's questioning face. She was holding up some stationary that she had just picked out, a light pink in color. They were in Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop.

“Um...yeah, I like it,” he shrugged, slightly distracted. He kept looking towards Zonko’s longingly. It looked much more fun in there.

“It’s pink,” Hermione said, slight disbelief evident in her voice.

“Uh huh,” he said, eyes still gazing out to the street.

“I hate pink. *You* hate pink,” she stated, this time not bothering to hide a scoff.

“Yeah. Wait...what?” he said, turning to her again, confused. Hermione was looking at him exasperatedly.

“Honestly Ron, you have the attention span of a three year old,” she sighed, putting back the offending pink stationary.

Ron looked even more confused. “Why the heck did you ask then if you hate pink so much?”

“To see if you were really paying attention which, unsurprisingly, you weren’t,” she said obviously.

Ron opened, and then closed his mouth. *Girls...* he thought, shaking his head. *They’re crazy, all of them.*

Hermione sighed and gave him a reluctant smile. “Fine. Let’s go to Zonko’s.”

A bright grin spread across Ron’s face then. “Best idea you’ve had all day,” he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her out of the shop.

They walked outside into the chilly air, pulling their winter coats closer against themselves as they held hands. The sky was steadily becoming grayer, which probably meant more snow was on its way. They walked in silence for a bit. The streets were fairly empty due to the fact that most of the students were crowded in The Three Broomsticks to keep out of the cold.

Ron kept his gaze ahead towards Zonko’s, inwardly debating about what he should buy. Dean had gotten him good a few days ago (thanks to the Trick Tumbler). Ron wished that his brothers would

open up a shop here already. Then he could *really* get Dean back good.

He was surprised when his thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Hermione, who had stopped abruptly in the middle of the street. He looked at her to see what had caused her to halt so suddenly and saw her staring down an alleyway to their right.

“Hermione? What—”

“Shh!” she said, interrupting him sharply. She was staring down the alleyway with a curious look of focus. She seemed to be listening for something...

Ron frowned. He was about to ask her what the heck she was listening for when he heard something too. Something about the slurred voice that was drifting out from the alleyway seemed familiar...

“Isn’t that...?” he trailed off, but Hermione tugged him towards the sound before he could finish the thought.

“Come on,” she whispered.

“What? Hermione, wait—”

But Hermione wasn’t listening. She pulled him with her into the alleyway, moving forward as stealthily as possible. It was much darker in the small space between the two shops, but soon two figures could be seen near the end of it, slightly concealed behind a stack of wooden crates. Hermione quickly pulled Ron into a doorway so they wouldn’t be seen, and pushed them both against it.

Ron was looking at her like she was crazy but knew to keep his mouth shut. The conversation between the two figures was much clearer from here, and he soon found himself engrossed with trying to hear it.

“Any and all information you can give me, friend. I would be in your debt, o’ course...” said the slurred voice.

"I done tol' ye, Dung. Aint been nary a sign o' them...and believe ye me, I'd know it. Why're ye so keen on findin' em anyhow?" the second voice asked.

Ron started as he realized why the first voice had sounded so familiar. It was Mundungus. But what was he doing here in Hogsmeade? And whom exactly was he trying to find?

"Never you mind tha'," Mundungus continued in a hushed whisper. "Jus' keep an eye out for any information fer me, would ya? I'd appreciate your discretion in this matter as well..." he trailed off meaningfully.

"Oh, course, course," the second man said hurriedly. "I suppose th' Order will repay me fer my services?" he said, hinting that this wasn't really a question.

"No!" Mundungus blurted, then looked around quickly. He lowered his voice again. "I mean...that is, I'd be in your debt if you kept this between us. If anyone else from th' Order approaches you for information I'll double anythin' they offer you for it. If you share it with me exclusively, that is."

A silence fell before the second man spoke again. "Double, ye say? Hmmm....all righ' then. Still the same ole Dung, eh?" the man laughed heartily.

The two men muttered some words of parting then and exited the alleyway in the opposite direction that Ron and Hermione had entered from. When they were sure they were gone, the two stepped out from their concealed position in the doorway and made their way back out onto the open street.

"What the heck was that about?" Ron asked, confusion playing over his features.

"It's obvious isn't it?" Hermione said, turning to him. "Mundungus is up to his usual sketchy dealings again."

"But you heard what he said! He's going behind the Order's back about something," Ron said, a worried tone creeping into his voice.

Hermione gave him a grim look. "Ron, it's Mundungus. Of course he goes behind their back about stuff. He's still a crook, that's never going to change. Although it was rather strange he seemed so adamant about keeping it from them," she frowned slightly, looking towards the alleyway again.

Ron frowned too. "I'm going to write to dad about it. They need to know ole Dung is up to something."

Hermione whirled towards him then. "Ron, no! You can't put information like that in a letter! What if it gets intercepted? You could put the Order in danger," she said firmly.

"What if this is important Hermione? You even said yourself that it seemed weird that he was so set on hiding information," Ron argued.

Hermione fell silent, her mind working furiously for a moment. Then, a solution to the problem struck her suddenly. "Lupin!" she exclaimed. "Of course! Why didn't we think of that before? We can just tell him after class or something. If he thinks it's important enough he can tell Dumbledore," she said, pleased with herself.

Ron grinned. "Oh, right! Brilliant Hermione," he said, feeling rather stupid for not thinking of that.

She grinned too, but it faded quickly. "He definitely should know about it, but don't be surprised if nothing comes of it, Ron. I'm sure they're quite used to Mundungus being his shifty self. It's probably nothing..." she trailed off.

But even Hermione had trouble believing her own words. There was something off about the scene they had just witnessed in the alleyway between Mundungus and that other man. She just didn't know what it was. The thought was slightly unsettling to say the least.

But Remus would know what to do. The Order had always been able to keep Mundungus in check before. Okay, so maybe that wasn't *entirely* true, but they would know what to do about the situation all the same. She hoped so at least...

She sighed. "Come on. Let's go, it's freezing out here," she said softly, reaching for his hand once more. Ron simply nodded and fell into pace beside her as they made their way to the joke shop, though humor was the last thing on either of their minds right now.

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It was official. There was definitely something wrong with her.

The funny feeling Ana got whenever she was in the same vicinity as Harry seemed to have increased tenfold as of late. For no reason whatsoever it felt like.

Maybe it was just a temporary something, she told herself. Maybe it would go away after a while.

But as the days passed on, the feeling hardly dissipated at all. In fact, the more time she spent with Harry, the more the feeling increased. It scared her a little, but oddly enough she found that it wasn't altogether disagreeable.

She caught herself looking forward to each new day (something that had *never* occurred in the past) and seeing Harry's grinning face in the Great Hall, or watching him run his hand through his hair in frustration during Potions, or seeing his green eyes light up with laughter as he and Ron played around with their Trick Tumblers.

The obvious answer to all of this did not even cross her mind until the day of the first Quidditch match, Gryffindor against Slytherin. There was a buzz in the air around school that day. People were tittering with excitement everywhere Ana looked. But no one was half as excited as Harry. Or as nervous.

Ana noticed his continuous glances at the clock in their lessons, and how he fidgeted in his seat every two seconds. The excitement was starting to get to her as well.

"Would you stop that, Harry?" she whispered during their Transfiguration class. Harry had been shifting noisily in his seat for

the past ten minutes. "You're making *me* nervous, and I'm not even on the team! You're going to do great," she said exasperatedly.

Harry looked over at her. "Sorry, I just...I always get a little nervous before games." It didn't help that this was his first match as Captain. He wanted to make a good impression, after all, and leading his team to victory in their first match would definitely do that.

Ana smiled at him warmly. "Harry, you're an amazing Captain. Trust me, you have nothing to worry about. Those Slytherins won't know what hit them."

Harry grinned slowly, suddenly feeling much better at hearing Ana's kind words. Before he could tell her so, however, McGonagall interrupted them.

"While I'm sure your conversation is far more interesting than my lesson Mr. Potter and Ms. Brighton, I do hope you can steel yourselves enough to at least pay *some* attention," she said in a stern voice from the front of the classroom.

Ana blushed and Harry looked slightly embarrassed as they both murmured "sorry's." McGonagall gave them both one last look of warning before continuing on with her teaching. When the bell finally rang, the students began filing out hurriedly, anxious to get out to the pitch for good seats.

"Well, wish me luck," Harry said as they made their way into the hallway.

"Good luck, Harry. I'll be cheering for you," Ana smiled at him.

"Thanks, Ana," he grinned. "See you out there," he said.

She nodded and waved him goodbye, following the other students out to the pitch. She met with Lavender and Parvati along the way who both grabbed onto her excitedly to find good seats together. They sat among the cheering Gryffindors, all of whom were waiting impatiently for the players to make their appearance.

“So how are you finding Hogwarts so far, Ana?” Lavender turned to her, grinning.

“I love it. It’s been amazing,” Ana said with a genuine smile. She meant every word.

“A lot of that’s thanks to a certain someone I bet, though, huh?” Parvati asked with a knowing smile.

“What do you mean?” Ana asked, slightly confused.

Lavender giggled. “Oh come on, Ana. Don’t be coy. We’re talking about Harry,” she said. When Ana simply continued giving her a blank stare, she continued on. “You *like* him,” she stated simply, still grinning.

Ana gaped at them. “What?”

“Don’t even try to deny it,” Parvati said. “It’s so obvious.”

Ana opened her mouth, but no words came. Did she like Harry? As more than a friend? The answer came to her like a slap in the face.

Oh Gods...I do like him.

It explained everything. The butterflies, the nervousness, the blushing...everything. She felt like a complete idiot for not realizing it until now.

She had a crush on Harry Potter.

The crowd around her jumped up from their seats with a roar as the players finally came out onto the field and soared up into their positions, but Ana was frozen in place, shocked into stillness. She glanced up in time to see Harry smile in her direction and send her a small wave before soaring higher into his place high above the rest of the players.

Lavender smirked when she saw this and turned to Ana once again. “And if I’m not mistaken, he likes you too,” she winked.

Ana couldn't have responded even if she wanted to. Could that be true? Could Harry really like her? But why? She wasn't anything special...Lavender must be wrong. There's no way someone as great as Harry could like her like that. She refused to believe it and pushed down the small bubble of hope that had begun to form in her. It was a silly thought anyway...

Harry took his position and waited impatiently for the whistle to blow. Now that he was on the familiar field, the nervousness dissipated and was replaced with the excitement of playing his favorite sport. He surveyed his teammates and was proud to see looks of determination on their faces.

"Oi, scarhead! Try not to fall off your broom this time. Wouldn't want that, now would we?" the familiar drawling voice of Draco Malfoy called to him. The two seekers hovered in front of each other as they waited for the game to begin. Malfoy was smirking, clearly very amused by his own taunting.

Harry's mouth formed a line as he ignored the blonde Slytherin in front of him. It wasn't worth the effort, and he had a Snitch to focus on.

Draco saw this and grinned even wider. "Besides," he said, "your little girlfriend is watching. Might be a bit embarrassing," he laughed.

Harry stiffened visibly but remained silent. When would the stupid whistle blow?

Seeing he'd had an effect with this statement, Malfoy went on. "She's cute, that one. Ana is it? May have to have another chat with her sometime. Ask her why she's hanging around a loser like you."

He'd gone too far. Harry didn't have *that* strong a willpower. "Do that, and you'll long for the days when being turned into a ferret was all you had to worry about," he growled, gripping his broom so hard it threatened to snap in two.

This shut Malfoy up. They glared daggers at each other, and the only thing that prevented them from taking the fight further was the shrill blow of the whistle that signaled the start of the game.

They took off in separate directions and kept their eyes peeled for the glint of gold, watching the game at the same time. Harry was fuming, but tried to focus on his fellow teammates, which he was finding very difficult. He knew he shouldn't let Malfoy get to him, but what he'd said about Ana had upset him.

A roar from the Slytherin side of the stands erupted, and Harry whipped his head around to see that they had been the first ones to score. He shook his head, angry with himself for not concentrating more and tried to pry all thoughts of Ana from his head. It was slightly difficult to say the least...

It wasn't long before the Gryffindors caught up, earning cheers from their fellow Housemates. Harry cheered them on as well, calling out orders now and then. Ron, apparently furious with himself for letting in the first goal, was putting in extra effort not to let it happen again. He blocked the Slytherins attempts at making another goal with a determination that made Harry extremely proud.

This went on for some time, until the score was neck and neck, with Gryffindor behind one goal. Both Harry and Draco were now furiously searching the air for the Snitch, knowing that whoever caught it would win the game. Draco was tailing Harry wherever he went much to his annoyance, but he pushed the small impediment to the back of his mind.

Screams and shouts filled the air as Gryffindor scored, tying the game. Harry barely had time to feel excited when a flash of gold to his left caught his eye. In a flash he was off after it as it flew towards the ground. He could hear the whoosh of Draco's broom and soon he was beside him, both hunched forward as they dived. They neared the ground at a frightening speed, the sounds of the crowd's roars like a buzz in Harry's ears.

He was so close...he stretched out his hand...it was inches away now...

Then, with a suddenness that nearly knocked him off his broom, Harry felt Draco ram into his side roughly, causing him to lose his advantage. Boos were heard from the Gryffindor side of the stands as the two young men pulled up level with the ground below. The Snitch

was still in sight, speeding towards the goal posts. Draco surged forward so quickly to grab it Harry was sure it was over.

But just as Draco lunged for the Snitch with both hands, it swerved to the right unexpectedly directly in Harry's path. This caused Draco to lose his balance, and he fell unceremoniously the few feet to the earth below. Harry grinned and sped forward, catching the Snitch with ease in his gloved hand.

The crowd went wild, and he was vaguely aware of the announcer shouting that Gryffindor had won. He landed and was soon by his teammates, who were all rejoicing and clapping him on the back, ecstatic about their victory.

"You did it!" Ron said happily to Harry as they stood on the field. People were crowding around them, wanting to congratulate the players for their win.

"We did it," Harry grinned at him, feeling happier than he had in some time.

Ron was soon swept away as he laughed with Dean and Ginny, and Harry guessed Hermione would come to congratulate him soon as well. This reminded him of Ana, and he caught himself looking out over the crowd for her familiar face.

As he tried his hardest to catch a glimpse of her, he suddenly felt a tapping at his back and turned to see Ana standing there, a huge grin on her face. That grin was immediately mirrored on Harry's own.

Before he realized what he was doing, he grabbed her and lifted her off the ground in a big hug, causing her to laugh at the unexpectedness of it.

"Congratulations, Harry," she said as he released her. "You were wonderful out there."

"Thanks Ana," he said softly, smiling for all he was worth. They stood together in silence as the crowd milled around them, unable to look away from each other.

Ana looked up at him and everything Lavender and Parvati had said came back to her in an instant. Here he was. Just Harry. The boy who had found a way into her heart. The boy who made her laugh...*really* laugh for the first time in her life. The boy who made her happier than she'd ever been before. She realized it finally.

So what now?

"Harry! You coming or what?"

Harry broke eye contact with Ana to look at Ron, who was motioning towards the locker rooms. The other teammates were heading that way as well.

"Ana, come on. Party in the common room," Lavender said as she walked up to the pair. She smiled knowingly at Harry and Ana, sensing their reluctance to part from each other. "Don't worry, Harry. She'll be up there waiting for you," she said with a smirk as she began to pull Ana away.

Harry reddened slightly but gave them a wave as he turned to join his teammates. Ana was giving Lavender a murderous look.

"What?" Lavender said innocently.

Parvati joined them as they made their way up to Gryffindor tower where the celebration would begin. The common room was already filled with people by the time they got there, and Ana marveled at how festive it looked. There was a table groaning with food and drinks, people were gathered in groups chatting excitedly about the game, and a fire burned merrily in the hearth.

When the team finally made their entrance it was to the sound of cheers and whistles. Ana smiled and clapped with the rest of her Housemates, trying to scope out Harry in the crowd as discretely as possible. A few people moved out of the way, and he became visible immediately. She smiled automatically at the sight but wiped it away just as quickly. Lavender was at her side, still grinning at her.

Harry met Ana's gaze from across the room and felt a small smile crawl across his face. There she was...trying not to stand out as

usual. So different from all the other girls, some of whom were quite literally throwing themselves at him as he tried to maneuver through the pack of people.

“Good game Harry!”

“You looked great catching that Snitch...”

“You’re the best Captain we’ve ever had, Harry!”

He just smiled at them and brushed them off as politely as possible with a few ‘thank you’s’ and moved towards Ana. She smiled at him shyly when he approached her.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi,” she said, the shy smile still adorning her face.

There’s that shyness again, he thought to himself as he looked at her.
I’ll have to fix that...

“You want a butterbeer?” he asked her.

“Oh...yeah, uh, sure,” she said.

He went to retrieve the drinks, and Ana could almost kick herself. She knew she was acting like a fool. She couldn’t help it. She didn’t know how she was supposed to act around him now...

He came back and gave her the butterbeer, which tasted heavenly. Soon after that she became a little more comfortable. She laughed with her fellow Gryffindors as they joked around and discussed the game. Harry stayed by her side the whole night, even when he was talking to Dean or Seamus about specific Quidditch details Ana knew absolutely nothing about.

Ron and Hermione were there too, but there were so many people at this little “party” that Harry and Ana hardly noticed them, though Ana did manage to congratulate Ron as well when he passed by her to get to the food table. He grinned at her and gave his thanks, seeming thrilled about their win.

While she was occupied with this, Ana failed to notice Lavender creep up to Harry's side with a mischievous grin.

"Having fun, Harry?" she asked him.

"Oh, hey Lavender. Yeah, I'm having a great time," he smiled politely at her.

"Well you must be with Ana here, and all. She has a crush on you, you know..."

Harry nearly choked on his butterbeer at the unexpectedness of this last sentence. "What?" he sputtered.

Lavender just laughed. "Have fun..." she said simply with a knowing grin, disappearing back into the crowd.

Harry stared after her in disbelief, but quickly wiped the look away when Ana turned back to him after speaking to Ron, completely oblivious to what had just happened. He smiled at her and pushed the shocking revelation to the back of his mind as he was caught up in conversation with his friends yet again.

The night wore on, and one by one people began trickling upstairs to their dormitories, all the excitement finally catching up with them. Harry and Ana had found spots on the couch, and Harry waved goodnight to Dean and Seamus as they headed to their beds. They asked if he was coming but he wasn't quite ready for sleep to claim him yet. Besides, Ana was here...

He turned his head to look at her as she gazed into the fire with a small smile. His heart gave one of those funny extra beats at the sight.

"You really did do great today, Harry," she said, turning to meet his eyes with a grin. "Even if you did scare me half to death with that dive of yours."

Harry laughed. "Thanks. I got lucky, really. Malfoy would have gotten it if it hadn't swerved like that..."

“Well, so would you have if he hadn’t pushed you like that. What is wrong with that kid?” she said, anger creeping into her voice.

Harry smirked. “Malfoy? He’s Malfoy. That’s what’s wrong with him. Hey, how did he look falling off his broom? I missed it.”

“Harry,” Ana said reproachfully, but couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped her. “It was pretty funny, actually. I could see him turn bright red even from where I was sitting.”

“Good,” Harry said with a satisfied grin. *Stupid git deserved it....*

Ana simply shook her head, still smiling. A silence fell between them, and it was only then she realized they were the only ones left. How late was it? That nervousness had returned to her stomach now, especially since she could feel Harry’s gaze upon her. Maybe it was time to leave...

“Er...I should probably...get to bed,” she said slowly, rising from her seat on the couch. “Night Harry,” she said quickly. She had barely taken two steps when she felt his soft hand grab her own gently.

“Wait...stay,” he whispered, his green eyes never leaving her own. They pleaded with her silently, and before she knew it she had sunk down beside him slowly.

Harry swallowed as he looked at her. The firelight danced across her face, giving her an almost heavenly glow. The silence in the room was deafening. He needed to break it. Suddenly Lavender’s words came back to him. Was it really true? Now was as good a time as any to find out, he supposed.

Here goes...

“So...Lavender is under the impression you have a crush on me,” he said finally with a small smile.

Ana paled. “W-what?” *I’m gonna kill her...*

Harry smiled at her, saying nothing for a moment. He then looked down at his hands. This was it. Moment of truth. Finally, he looked up at her, all joking aside.

"Is it true?" he asked softly.

Ana opened and closed her mouth. *Say no! Deny it! Lie to him!*

But she couldn't. She couldn't lie. Not to Harry.

"Yes," she whispered, barely audibly.

She quickly cast her eyes downward, afraid of what she might see in Harry's eyes. She'd done it. It was over now. He'd probably laugh at her, or brush her aside like all those other girls. She could say goodbye to the friendship she'd had with him over these past months. Nothing would be the same after this.

She felt his hand come beneath her chin, lifting it until her eyes met his own. He was much closer now.

"Well, that's good," he whispered. "I was beginning to worry it was one-sided."

Shock. The only way to describe what Ana felt at that moment. "What?" she asked in disbelief.

"Ana..." he began, lifting his hand to cup her face. But words couldn't say what he was feeling at that moment. He'd have to show her...

Ana watched as Harry inched closer. She could feel his warm hands on either side of her face. His soft breath upon her lips. She shivered, but it had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. She sat rigid, her heart pounding wildly as she looked into his eyes. They seemed to beckon to her, and she realized quite suddenly that he'd never looked more appealing than at that moment.

His eyes moved to her lips. Everything else faded away and nothing, not even a hundred dementors, could have stopped Harry this time. Slowly, gently, Harry lowered his lips to her own, where they met in a soft, sweet kiss.

Ana closed her eyes and let the feeling overwhelm her. She never wanted it to end.

Hours seemed to pass before they finally parted. Harry's eyes remained closed as he continued to hold her face in his hands. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that..." he whispered finally.

Ana looked at him, smiling slowly. "Well, I'm glad you did," she said, whispering as well. She felt giddy for some reason. Did what just happened really happen?

Harry opened his eyes and smiled at her as well. "Me too..."

She blushed and was very thankful the room was dim. She was right after all, then. Nothing *would* be the same after this.

Only this time it was in a good way.

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AN: The kiss!! Finally! Haha. So what'd you guys think? Did you like it? Sorry if it seemed a little rushed. But I thought it was a good spot for it.

I just want to give special thanks to the following people for reviewing my last chapter and responding to my questions: bfc, emeraldsgem, Jesse, blackshadow1006, emoscreamo, The Lost Tear, Reader, Le Diablo Blanc2, Prash, SoA, Skullera, Skiff-the-Thief, and Insane and Logical. Seriously, I appreciate it more than I can say, guys. You are all awesome.

Reviews keep me going, so if you're in a giving mood I will love you forever! Thanks again to my past reviewers and everyone who is reading this story. I'll get to work on the next chapter now. Bye everyone and have a great day!

Chapter 16

A smile crawled across Ana's face as she awoke the next morning. She'd just had the most wonderful dream...

Wait...

Her eyes snapped open. It hadn't been a dream...it had really happened. Harry had kissed her! She felt her cheeks burn as her smile grew in size.

He kissed me, he kissed me, he kissed me...

What did this mean now? Were they a couple? Is that what made someone a couple? She felt a twinge of panic and worry begin to gnaw at her. How was she supposed to act around him now? Should she pretend like it never happened? Should she acknowledge it? Act the same as before? Was it supposed to be this complicated?

Harry was waiting for her in the common room when she finally made her way down. She felt her heartbeat quicken at the sight of him.

"Hey," he said softly, a small smile adorning his face.

She smiled back, saying nothing. An awkward silence fell before Harry broke it.

"Ana—"

But before he could say more, he was interrupted by the loud laughter of some 5th years as they came down the stairs behind them, talking amongst themselves. They stared at each other unsurely as the group filed past, paying them no notice. More people followed and soon the common room was alive with chatting students, filing in and out as they made their way to breakfast or sitting down to work on some homework.

Ana stood there awkwardly, not sure what to do, and Harry ran a hand through his hair in mild frustration.

“You wanna get out of here?” he asked finally.

Ana hesitated. Being around all these people meant delaying the inevitable uncomfortable conversation between them that would surely take place if they were alone. But she found herself nodding in agreement despite this. She followed him out into the halls where they walked in silence, the chatter of the occasional group of students passing by echoing around them.

Before she knew what was happening, Ana felt a tug on her arm as Harry pulled her unceremoniously into the door they had just begun to walk past.

“Harry, what—“

“Shh!” he said as he closed the door behind them quickly.

Ana looked around the cramped, dim space in confusion and turned once again to Harry. She couldn’t help but give a small laugh at the odd situation. “Harry this is a broom closet,” she said, amused.

“So?” he asked, an adorable look of puzzlement crossing his features.

“Sooo...why exactly are we in here?” she asked.

“Oh. Well, I wanted to talk without...interruptions...I guess,” he said unsurely, seeming to realize it might have been a little silly.

“Oh. What, um, what did you wanna talk about?” she asked, although she had a good idea what it was. *Great, he’s going to tell me that it was a mistake*, she thought with a sinking heart. *He’s changed his mind. He doesn’t like me like that. How could he?*

Harry took a step closer to her in the already miniscule space. He seemed nervous. “Ana...about last night...”

Oh Gods. Here it comes. It was a mistake. He didn’t mean it after all.

“I just...I just want you to know that what I said last night...I...well, I wasn’t lying. And when I...you know...I...I did it because I wanted to. Because I...I really like you Ana, and...and, er, that’s it. I guess,” he

stammered, running a hand through his already mussed up hair, knowing he sounded like an idiot.

Ana tried to hide the surprise she felt at hearing this from him. She wasn't quite sure how to respond, but as she stared up at him, his face partly hidden in shadow, she knew he was looking back at her with the same care and gentleness he had shown her last night. All doubts were erased in her mind at that moment.

"I like you too, Harry. A lot," she said, a small smile forming on her lips.

He grinned at her then, and laughed in a sort of relieved way. She couldn't help but join in. "I'm horrible at this, aren't I?" he laughed.

"You? What about me? I've never kissed anyone before you Harry," she said with a smile. *And I never want to kiss anyone else*, she thought to herself, not daring to say it aloud.

The mention of the kiss seemed to thicken the air around them with tension as their nearness in the enclosed space became painfully aware to them both once again. Harry stared at her with an intensity that she could almost feel. His soft, deep voice broke the silence finally.

"And if I kissed you again?" He inched closer slowly, his eyes never leaving her own.

"Again...?" she asked as she swallowed. Her mouth had gone dry for some reason.

"Well, we *are* in a broom closet, after all..." he smiled.

When she just gave him a confused look, he immediately regretted the statement. *Of course she wouldn't know what that means, you idiot! She's Ana! Not Lavender or someone like that...* He was moving too fast. He didn't want to scare her away...

"Is...is that what people do in broom closets?" she asked, amused. Harry looked awfully flustered.

“Er...yeah, well, no...it was just a joke. I didn’t mean...er—“

“Harry?” she interrupted.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“You talk too much.”

She almost laughed at the slightly shocked look that came to his face at this, but held it in as she closed the space between them with a bravery she didn’t even know she had. She lifted herself up slowly to meet his lips with her own, letting her instincts take over. She felt his strong arms enclose around her as he pressed her to him, their kiss soft and gentle as the night before. Everything else faded away.

When they finally parted, she opened her eyes to see Harry’s grinning face, his arms still tight around her.

“I think I’ve been a bad influence on you,” he whispered, grinning playfully.

“Well, we *are* in a broom closet, remember?” she said with an innocent smile.

Harry laughed heartily at this, releasing all the tension and awkwardness that had been present until now. “Yup. Definitely a bad influence.”

Ana joined in his laughter this time. She was feeling slightly shocked at herself. Had she really just kissed him? Just like that? She didn’t do things like that! But it had felt so right...and she didn’t regret it in the slightest.

Harry chuckled once more as he looked down at her. “All right. Let’s go. Enough time in here and you’ll probably turn into a Slytherin on me or something.”

Ana laughed loudly at the thought as Harry opened the door and they tumbled out into the hallway. Their laughter was cut short, however, when they came face to face with none other than Professor Snape, who stood imperiously before the door they had just come out of. He

looked upon them with ill-concealed disgust. Ana blushed furiously at the unexpected sight of their Potions teacher, especially given what the situation must look like.

“Ten points from Gryffindor,” Snape said slowly in his oily voice, glancing from Ana’s face to Harry’s. “Each.”

Ana's face fell but as she turned to glance at Harry she saw, to her astonishment, that he was trying very hard not to laugh. Snape was giving him a hard glare, which seemed to only deepen Harry's need to burst out laughing. Ana elbowed him to no avail. At least he hadn't caved yet.

Snape threw one last gaze of loathing over the both of them before turning on his heel and heading back down the hallway, his black robes rustling behind him. As soon as he turned the corner, Harry's laughter escaped in its entirety. Ana smacked him in the arm.

“Are you daft? What is so funny?” she asked incredulously.

Harry was laughing so hard he had trouble drawing proper breaths. "Of all....the people...broom closet..." he trailed off as another fit of laughter overcame him.

Ana shook her head at him as a chuckle escaped her. “Crazy...” she muttered.

“That was fun,” Harry said, a mischievous glint in his green eyes. “Remind me to pull you into broom closets more often.”

Ana blushed scarlet and laughed in embarrassment, hitting him once more. "Prat," she said.

Harry took her hand as his laughs subsided and began to lead her down to the Great Hall. "Come on," he said with a grin.

She couldn't help but grin too and followed, loving the way her small hand fit so perfectly into his own.

[illegible]

After the broom closet episode, Harry and Ana had difficulty concentrating on anything else besides each other. They would sneak surreptitious glances at each other during lessons, both lost in their own separate thoughts about what had occurred between them.

Ana could still hardly believe that Harry had kissed her...or that she had kissed him. It was only months ago that she had been living a life filled with nothing but fear and pain. She never would have dreamt in her wildest dreams that something like this could happen to her. That she could ever possibly be this happy. But here she was. Happy. What did she ever do to deserve someone like him?

She didn't know. She also didn't know what this new development between the two of them meant. She only hoped that this wouldn't ruin the friendship they had built up over the time they had known each other. A life without Harry...well, it wouldn't really be life at all.

Harry, too, had his worries about what this might mean for his friendship with Ana. But as he thought about it, he realized that there was no turning back now. At least not for him. He needed her. The way she felt so right in his arms when they kissed. He smiled unconsciously at the memory. With Ana he was...happy. Something he hadn't truly been in a long time. Perhaps it was selfish, but he didn't care. She'd filled these past few months with laughter and life, despite some of the more negative outcomes.

With this thought, he turned his attention from Ana to that of Hermione who sat near the front of their History of Magic class with Ron at her side. They hadn't spoken to each other since that day they had their big argument. Though it felt like it had been much longer than that to Harry. He'd been so happy these past few days that he had found himself wanting very much to just walk up to Hermione, apologize, and make things right between them, no matter what it took.

He missed her. He missed the camaraderie between them. The trio. Just because he and Ana...well, whatever he and Ana were...didn't mean that they couldn't still have that. He'd make Hermione see that Ana wasn't bad, that being her friend or...or more wasn't wrong. She'd have to see that. Right?

Yes, she'd have to. He was too happy to even imagine that things wouldn't turn out okay. With this encouraging thought, he turned his attention back to the lesson, his spirits lightened considerably. Course, it helped that Ana was sitting next to him, smiling.

Yeah, that helped a lot.

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It was a few nights later that Ana was walking back to the common room after one of her lessons with Professor Shrubblock when she was halted by Lavender and Parvati.

"Ana! Wait up!" she heard Lavender call from behind her. She bit back a groan as she slowed, waiting for the two girls to catch up.

"Hi guys," she said reluctantly as they fell into step beside her. They were both grinning at her in a knowing way, which made her very uncomfortable.

"So is it official yet?" Lavender asked.

"Is what official?"

"That you and Harry are an item," Parvati giggled.

"And don't even think about denying it. The way you two look at each other, the way you hold hands when you think no one's looking..." Lavender trailed off meaningfully.

"I..." Ana began, about to tell them it was none of their business, but stopped as she thought about the question. Was it official? What was "it" anyway?

"I have no idea," she finally said, more to herself than to the two girls beside her.

They entered the portrait hole to the common room to be met with the sight of Harry himself lounging on the couch; his *Quidditch Through*

the Ages book in his hands. Lavender gave Ana a small nudge with her shoulder.

"Better find out then, shouldn't you?" she whispered, giving her a wink as she and Parvati climbed the stairs to the girls dormitories.

Ana watched them go and then walked slowly to where Harry was seated on the couch.

"Hey," he grinned at her, shutting his book. "I was waiting for you. How was the lesson?"

Ana sat down next to him and pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Fine," she said distractedly. Lavender's words still echoed in her mind. It didn't help that this was the very spot where the kiss that had started it all had occurred.

"You all right?" he smiled.

She frowned slightly as she stared straight ahead into the blazing fire, trying to decide how exactly to form her next words. *Here goes nothing...*

"Harry...are we...I mean, um...am...am I your...your, er..."

"My what?" he asked softly.

"Girlfriend?" she asked in a barely audible whisper, feeling so incredibly foolish her cheeks burned.

A look of mild surprise crossed Harry's face, but it was gone an instant later, replaced by the hint of a grin. He pretended to think for a moment.

"Hmmm...I like you Ana...but girlfriend? You're far too evil for me. I don't associate with Slytherins," he said, perfectly serious.

Ana stared at him for a moment, her mouth hanging open slightly. It was only when Harry started grinning that she knew he was kidding around.

“You git!” she said, punching him in the shoulder, trying to look angry.

Harry laughed and lunged at her, digging his fingers into her sides as they toppled over on the couch. Ana screeched in laughter, trying to fight Harry off to no avail. He relentlessly continued to tickle her until tears streamed from her eyes. He stopped finally, grinning like a fool, as she lay trapped beneath him on the couch. She caught her breath, a chuckle escaping every now and then as Harry stared down at her with smiling eyes.

A silence fell as she looked up at him, once again painfully aware of his proximity. His clean scent drifted over her and his eyes bored into her own. There was no hint of a joke in them now.

“Would you like that?” he began, seeming nervous for some reason. “Being my girlfriend, I mean...” he trailed off in a soft whisper, never taking his eyes off of hers.

She didn’t even need to think about it. The answer came to her as easily as though it had always been in her mind, just waiting to be released. “Yes. I’d like that very much Harry,” she whispered.

She was unable to stop the smile that spread across her face as she watched Harry’s face light up at her answer. So this is what it felt like to be needed...

“Good,” Harry said with a grin. “Thought I might have to tickle you until you surrendered.”

Ana laughed, and Harry smiled at the way her eyes sparkled in the firelight. He reached up to brush a stray hair from her face, letting his hand linger on her cheek. Ana held her breath and closed her eyes as Harry lowered his lips to meet her own. She wrapped her arms around his neck as their kiss deepened into something far more passionate than the ones before.

They parted finally, both breathless from the kiss. Harry had to stop himself from immediately going back for more. He knew he wouldn’t be able to restrain himself so easily next time if they continued. Instead, he gently rested his forehead against her own, listening to her soft breathing.

“You’ll be the death of me, Ana...” he whispered finally, the hint of a smile playing across his lips.

She blushed and smiled as well, saying nothing. They lay there for a long time afterwards, content with the mere presence of one another as they watched the firelight dance across the walls. Ana smiled as she snuggled deeper into Harry’s strong embrace, feeling safer and happier than she ever had in her entire life.

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December came and with it news that Harry and Ana were now a couple spread like wildfire. People stared and whispered when they would walk past holding hands in the halls, looking as though they were lost in their own little world. With it brought varying reactions from people.

Lavender and Parvati were thrilled for Ana. They giggled and grilled her for information about Harry and how good of a kisser he was whenever they could get her alone. All of which, Ana did her best to ignore or politely refuse to answer. It was a good thing that she was with Harry most of the time.

Draco took to staring at her more often and suspiciously than ever, convinced that she looked familiar somehow. Pansy Parkinson was annoyed by this, jealous that someone was diverting Draco’s attention away from herself. She glared at Ana every single chance she got, making sure to make snide remarks in a clearly audible voice whenever she would pass.

Ron was happy for them, but not altogether surprised. He’d told Harry that it was about time because he was starting to get tired of him and Ana making googly eyes at each other. Harry had laughed, glad that his friend was happy for him.

Hermione, however, was a different story altogether. She, too, had been coming closer and closer to just abandoning her stubborn streak and apologizing to Harry. She missed him. Missed their friendship. She could learn to deal with his friendship with Ana, or that’s what she kept telling herself at least. But when she learned that

they were now a couple, all of the doubts and disapproving thoughts returned to her with a vengeance.

Ron, much to his displeasure, was on the receiving end of much of her wrath and frustration over this matter.

"I cannot believe him! Is he crazy? What was he thinking, honestly!" she huffed, upon learning the news. She paced the nearly empty common room in a flustered fashion.

"Well, it's not—" Ron began, only to be cut off by Hermione.

"I mean, does he even realize the repercussions this could have?"

"Well, I don't think—"

"He's acting like a selfish prat! I can't believe this..."

"Hermione—"

"And of course he's just walking around acting as though there is absolutely nothing wrong with what he's doing--"

"HERMIONE!"

She halted abruptly at the sound of Ron's shout and looked at him in surprise.

"Would you stop?" he said in frustration. "Harry's happy. Can't you just leave him be?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond but found that she couldn't find the words. Deep down she knew Ron was right. She should leave him be. She relented and stopped her tirade, keeping silent about it from then on. But that didn't stop her from disagreeing with Harry's actions.

But as Christmas break loomed nearer everyone, even Hermione, slowly began to forget about Harry and Ana, too excited to talk about much else. Students prepared to go home for the holiday, the halls were soon decorated with wreaths and baubles, snow now covered

the grounds and castle heavily, and there was a cheerfulness in the air that could only be explained by the coming of Christmas.

Harry and Ana took to staying up late into the night in the common room, lounging on the couch and drinking hot chocolate in front of the roaring fire. They would talk and laugh together quietly, or Ana would read from one of her lesson books as Harry rested his head on her lap in peaceful silence, or they would sneak the occasional kiss.

It just so happened that on one particular night, while they were engaged in one of their “occasional kisses,” Professor McGonagall chose that very moment to come waltzing through the portrait hole door, halting abruptly when she saw the scene before her.

Harry and Ana parted from their embrace and shot up from the couch like lightening at the entrance of their Head of House, both blushing furiously. McGonagall took in the sight of the two of them before her with a mixture of disapproval and amusement. Harry’s already untamable hair stuck out in all directions, his glasses were askew, and his shirt was wrinkled. Ana didn’t look much better, her lips swollen and red and her hair a wild mess, not to mention the *extremely* guilty look on her face.

“Professor McGonagall!” Harry said, looking flustered. “What...er...what are you doing here?” he asked. The late hour occurred to him and therefore he found it strange that she would be choosing this time of night to visit.

McGonagall peered at the both of them over the top of her spectacles sternly. “I came to fetch the both of you, actually. Professor Dumbledore has requested your presence in his office. How fortunate I’d find you both awake and together, no less...” she trailed off, the hint of a wry grin crossing her face.

Ana blushed even more if that were at all possible, but Harry merely frowned. “Professor Dumbledore? He wants to see us *now*? Is everything all right? What’s happened? Is it the Order? Or Voldemort—”

His hurried questions were cut short by a sharp hush from McGonagall. “Shhh! Mr. Potter kindly lower your voice and remind

yourself where you are! You must not speak of such matters here,” she said in a harsh whisper. When she was satisfied that he would remain quiet, she continued. “I am supposed to take you to the Headmaster’s office. There is nothing more I can tell you. Please follow me and do keep quiet.”

With that, she turned on her heel and swiftly made her way to the portrait hole, not bothering to see if they were following. Ana shot Harry a worried glance and took the hand he offered to her as they hurried out of the common room to catch up with McGonagall.

As they walked at a swift pace, their echoing footsteps the only sound to be heard in the dark hallways, Harry’s mind was working at a furious pace. Something had to be wrong. Why else would Dumbledore summon them in the middle of the night? So what had happened? Had there been an attack? Was someone hurt? A knot of worry began to form in his stomach as all sorts of worst case scenarios rushed through his mind. The only reason why he was keeping his cool was the fact that Ana was by his side, holding onto his hand securely.

Ana, however, was just as plagued by worry as Harry was. She was wondering if this had anything to do with her parents. Had they been caught? A swell of hope rose within her at the thought. But what if they hadn’t been? What if there was news of them? Had they found out she was here? She felt the worry wash away the small bubble of hope that had formed. Unconsciously, she gripped Harry’s hand tighter.

They reached the entrance to Dumbledore’s office finally, and McGonagall gave the password. When the stairs appeared, she turned to the couple behind her.

“Go ahead. He is waiting for you,” she said as she stepped aside, indicating that she would not be joining them.

Harry quickly stepped forward onto the staircase, pulling Ana along with him. They rose and Harry hesitated for the briefest of moments before opening the large door before him. Dumbledore sat behind his desk, his face calm. He smiled and rose at the entrance of the two of them.

“Ah, Harry. Ana,” he said, nodding to each in turn. “I apologize for the late hour, but I’m afraid it was necessary for this particular meeting.”

Harry studied the Headmaster carefully, about to ask why they had been summoned, but a movement out of the corner of his eye stopped him. It was only then he realized someone was sitting in the armchair before Dumbledore’s desk, and that person chose that moment to rise and face the two youths before him.

“*Sirius?*” Harry said, astonished.

“Hello Harry,” Sirius smiled. He caught sight of Ana standing beside his godson and threw her a warm smile as well. “Ana. Good to see you again.”

She smiled automatically. “Hello Sirius. Good to see you too.”

Harry smiled as well at the sight of his godfather, but it was gone in an instant. “What are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here...Did something happen? Why aren’t you at Grimmauld Place?” he asked quickly, the worry creeping back into his voice.

“Harry, stop, everything is fine,” Sirius said, holding up a placating hand.

Harry frowned in confusion. “Then why—“

He stopped when Ana laid a hand on his arm. “Let him speak, Harry,” she whispered gently.

This exchange did not go unnoticed by the two older men in the room, least of all Sirius. “Smart girl,” he grinned. Harry threw him a tiresome glare but said nothing as he waited for Sirius to reveal the purpose behind his visit.

Sirius cleared his throat and began once again. “Well, I’ve talked this over with Professor Dumbledore here, and I’ve been thinking, what with the break coming up and everyone leaving to go back home, I thought you might want to...come to Grimmauld Place for Christmas...rather than staying here, that is. Remus would have asked you but, well, I thought I’d come, seeing as how it was my idea

and all...Course if you'd rather not, that's fine too. I just thought it might be nice to get away from the castle for a bit..." he trailed off, a tad unsurely.

Harry face broke into a huge grin at this. "Really? That sounds great, Sirius!" He turned to Ana, who gave him a small smile. She felt extremely out of place. Harry noticed this immediately, and his grin slowly faded. "What about Ana? I can't leave her here..." he said finally.

"Harry, it's fine, really—" she began quickly.

"Well, of course Ana can come too. Why do you think I asked the both of you up here?" Sirius smiled.

This brought the grin right back to Harry's face, and Ana couldn't help but smile as well. Harry looked to Dumbledore, who had remained silent during all of this.

"Would that be all right, Professor?" Harry asked hopefully.

Dumbledore gave them a warm smile and nodded. "Yes, Harry. I think that would be fine. Grimmauld Place is probably the safest place you both can be besides Hogwarts. Perhaps even more so. The proper precautions will be taken to make sure you arrive there discretely."

"So it's a yes then?" Sirius asked them both.

Harry turned to Ana, then grinned at Sirius. "It's a yes."

Sirius beamed at them and nodded. "Well, I suppose that's it then. I'll see the both of you soon. Looking forward to it."

"Us too, Sirius," Harry said.

And it was true. Christmas was approaching fast and now that they had something to look forward to, Harry and Ana couldn't be more excited about it. They smiled at each other and said their goodbyes to Sirius and Dumbledore before making their way back to the common

room, counting down the hours until they would get to leave the halls of Hogwarts, if only for a short while.

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Before Harry and Ana knew it, the time for their departure had arrived. They had to wait until all of the other students left first, wanting to keep up the illusion that they would be staying at Hogwarts for the break, something Harry usually did anyways. They said goodbye to Ron, who left with Hermione to go off to the Burrow for Christmas.

Harry hadn't forgotten his decision to try and make up with Hermione, but she'd been more adamant than ever about avoiding him. She'd been that way ever since he and Ana had become a couple. It bothered him a little, but he was far too happy to really worry about it at the moment. He'd just have to put it off until after the break. Maybe she'd have cooled down by then...

Harry and Ana, as per Dumbledore's instructions, used the fireplace in his office to travel by Floo to Grimmauld Place, arriving into the kitchen to immediately be greeted by Sirius' grinning face.

"Hello you two!" he said, clearly very excited about their arrival.

"Hey Sirius," Ana said with a bright smile.

Harry, however, was too busy looking around at his surrounding in shock. Not only did the usually dark and dank kitchen look brighter and cleaner, it was also decorated for Christmas. A large wreath hung above the fireplace and the table was covered with a clean white tablecloth and a vase filled with red poinsettias. The air was warm and pleasant, not the cold and drafty room he had been expecting.

"What did you do?" Harry finally asked, still looking around him in disbelief.

"Just a little sprucing up. Thought the occasion called for it," Sirius replied, still grinning like a fool. "Come on. I'll show you to your rooms."

Ana followed Sirius and Harry was right behind her, still struck speechless by the change in his surroundings. He soon found that it wasn't just the kitchen that had changed, but it seemed the whole house was different. It no longer had a depressing, dark feel to it. The decorations here and there helped with that of course, but it just seemed like a happier place.

Once they had gotten settled in to their separate room, Harry and Ana joined Sirius in the living room. A large Christmas tree sat in the corner, slightly crooked and bedecked with a very random assortment of ornaments. Harry grinned and Ana smiled brightly at the sight.

"Did you do all this yourself?" Harry asked his godfather as he sat down, pulling Ana down next to him.

Sirius took a seat in an overstuffed armchair and ran a hand through his long, dark hair. Ana smiled automatically at the movement so similar to Harry's. "Well, I did most of it, yes. It was nothing, really. I had the time..." he trailed off sheepishly.

"I think it looks beautiful. You did a wonderful job, Sirius," Ana said warmly, meaning it. Harry nodded in agreement, knowing that it must have taken Sirius ages and a lot of hard work to make the house look this good. He knew his godfather had probably been beyond excited to have them as guests for the holidays.

Sirius smiled at the compliment, blushing slightly and looking very pleased. "Well, I'm just glad the both of you could come."

"Thank you again for inviting me, by the way," Ana said. "It will be nice to celebrate Christmas. I never--" she cut herself off as if realizing what she had been about to say. There she went, dampening the mood again.

Sirius frowned and Harry stared at her sympathetically, knowing she had never gotten a chance to celebrate Christmas before. Well, all that was about to change.

Before anyone could say anything else, Lupin walked into the living room with a pink-haired Tonks behind him. Sirius raised his eyebrows at this, but said nothing as Remus gave him a look of warning.

“Wotcher Harry!” Tonks said cheerfully as she spotted him. Harry grinned and rose to give her a hug, nodding a greeting at Lupin as well. Tonks spotted Ana and her grin grew in size. “You must be Ana! Wonderful to meet you finally. I’m Tonks, by the way,” she said as she shook Ana’s hand.

“Tonks is a member of the Order as well,” Harry told her in explanation.

“Oh that’s right,” Ana said, remembering her from that day in Diagon Alley. “Great to meet you too,” she smiled.

“I’ve invited Tonks to have dinner with us tonight,” Lupin began, stopping when Tonks laughed.

“No need to lie, Remus. I invited myself,” she winked towards Harry and Ana, who both laughed. “When I heard you two would be here I couldn’t resist. I’ve even offered to help with the cooking!”

Lupin gave her an exasperated look and Sirius gave a bark of laughter, which he quickly turned into a cough. Harry inwardly grimaced at the idea of Tonks helping with the food. He was glad Lupin would most likely be making most of it.

All of this went completely over Tonks’ head, and she turned to Ana with a joyful smile. “Come on. You can help me in the kitchen, and we can talk. I’ve been so excited to meet you,” she said as she took the girl’s arm and led her towards the door. Ana grinned and threw a smile at Harry before following Tonks down to the kitchen.

Lupin sighed. “I better go with them before she burns the house down.” He walked swiftly out of the room after the two girls, leaving Harry and Sirius alone.

Sirius reached down to pick up a familiar looking leather case from the floor that Harry hadn’t noticed until that moment.

“Care for a fight Harry? Just like old times?” Sirius grinned as he extracted a sword from the case.

Harry laughed and nodded, deftly catching the sword as Sirius threw it to him. “Only if you’re ready to lose,” Harry smirked.

Another bark of laughter erupted from Sirius as he took out his own sword and moved the furniture against the walls with a flick of his wand. "Well aren't we sure of ourselves? Let's see if you've retained any of that information I taught you in that big head of yours," he grinned devilishly as he raised his blade.

Harry laughed and with a lunge, he began the duel, their swords clanging loudly as they grinned at each other.

[illegible]

Being in a kitchen with Tonks was an interesting experience, to say the least.

Ana laughed at the eccentric woman's antics, liking her more and more as she helped her prepare the meal. Lupin kept a close watch over the food and discretely fixed anything Tonks did, whether it was adding too much of an ingredient or turning up the heat too high.

They would bump into each other every now and then in the small kitchen, and Lupin would reach a hand out to her waist to steady her each time. Tonks would laugh, muttering something about how clumsy she was, but Ana could see the faint color that came to Lupin's cheeks every time this happened. She smiled discretely at this, thinking they were very cute around each other.

Ana gathered some plates to set the table but nearly dropped them when a loud thumping was heard from above. “What is that?” she asked, slightly alarmed. It sounded like someone was running around upstairs.

Lupin craned his neck to look at the ceiling and gave a wry smile. “It seems Sirius has challenged Harry to a sword fight. Probably jumping on all the furniture like monkeys...” he muttered.

Tonks laughed and batted Lupin's chest with her hand. "Monkeys! That was good Rem..." she trailed off chuckling, turning to make sure the soup was being stirred properly.

There was nothing subtle about the blush creeping across his cheeks now, and Ana had to fight to keep from giggling at the sight.

When dinner was finally ready, a panting Sirius and Harry came down the stairs and sat at the table. Harry grinned at Ana and took a seat next to her while Sirius sat at the head of the table. This left Tonks and Lupin to sit next to each other across from Harry and Ana.

"So who won?" Ana asked with a smile.

"I did," they both said at the same time.

"What?" Harry said incredulously. "I beat you this time and you know it!"

"He's lying," Sirius winked at Ana, who laughed.

Harry scoffed and was about to argue more when Lupin cut him off. "Please, no arguing. I swear the both of you act like eight year olds around each other."

"Eight year old monkeys!" Tonks said, laughing at her own joke. Ana nearly choked on her pumpkin juice as she laughed too. Even Lupin couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. Sirius and Harry looked at each other in confusion and gave the rest of them strange looks.

"And you say we're the eight year olds?" Harry said, shaking his head as he chuckled.

"Well, there was never really any doubt where Tonks is concerned..." Lupin grinned, earning him a punch in the shoulder from the pink haired witch, who stuck her tongue out at him.

"My point exactly," Lupin laughed, and everyone, even Tonks, joined in.

"This is really great, Remus," Harry said when the laughter died down, pointing to his food with his fork. This immediately brought on a death stare from Tonks.

"Remus? I did most of the cooking! And Ana here helped too!" she said indignantly. Lupin had lowered his head and was holding the bridge of his nose with two fingers. Ana turned to Harry as well. "Yeah! What about us?" she said, eyebrows raised in question.

Harry looked as though he'd just dug himself into a hole he couldn't get out of, realizing his mistake. "Oh...um...right, that's what I meant. Great dinner you guys..." he trailed off, laughing nervously.

Ana just laughed and grinned at him, nudging him with her shoulder. Tonks smiled when she saw this exchange and couldn't help the next words out of her mouth.

"So, you two seem to have gotten quite close," she grinned at them, her eyes sparkling.

Ana blushed slightly, but Harry just smiled. "Well, I would hope so. She is my girlfriend after all..."

Sirius, who at that moment had been taking a drink from his butterbeer, nearly spewed it all over the table when he heard this.

"What?" he asked in surprise. "Why didn't you say anything? That's wonderful! About bloody time too," he exclaimed, a big grin on his face.

"Thought you knew..." Harry shrugged. He'd just assumed that Lupin had told him, seeing as how Lupin was their DADA teacher and therefore knew the goings on at Hogwarts. This included the news that Harry and Ana were a couple.

"Ana! You should have told me you snagged our Harry here," Tonks laughed. "We could have gossiped while we were cooking."

"Sorry," Ana said, laughing too. Harry looked at her with a warm smile.

"That's all right. We'll have plenty of time later," Tonks winked.

Harry scowled at her, but Tonks just grinned and once again resorted to sticking out her tongue. Ana smiled and began to feel a warmth build inside of her as she looked around the table at everyone's grinning and happy faces. It felt as though they were all a family, and she a part of it. It was an entirely new feeling, but as the dinner wore on and laughter continued to fill the room, she realized it was definitely one she could get used to...

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The days passed lazily, but there was never a shortage of things to do. Sirius was overjoyed to have company, and he was hardly ever seen without a grin on his face. Lupin would come in and out, presumably on assignments for the Order. He never talked about it in detail, probably because he didn't want to spoil the cheery mood that Christmas and Harry and Ana's arrival had brought. Tonks would stop by often to chat with Ana or to join them all for dinner again, though Ana had a sneaking suspicion that the real reason behind these visits was a certain shaggy professor.

The Order itself met a few times while Harry and Ana were there. Harry usually joined in the meetings, mostly because he insisted on being in the know about matters concerning Voldemort. It was decided that it was probably for the best that Ana not participate, not that she really wanted to anyway. She feared hearing any news of her parents, so it was a relief not to have to attend the meetings.

Instead, she would wait in Harry's room, sometimes late into the night, for him to return. Each time she would look at him expectantly, as though asking if there was any horrible news even though she knew she'd rather not know at all. But she couldn't stay in her room all alone without seeing him afterwards. Without his reassurance.

Christmas Eve was just one of these nights. Ana sat on Harry's bed with her knees pulled against her as she stared blankly at the moonlight streaming through the window. She was tired, but she forced herself to stay awake, waiting to hear Harry's familiar footsteps coming down the hallway. It wasn't long before this happened, and

she straightened when the doorknob turned and a very tired Harry came walking through the door.

He smiled when he saw her and moved to sit next to her on the bed. "Scoot over," he murmured gently, lying down when she did. He closed his eyes and sighed, reaching out a hand to pull her down next to him. He pulled her close, wrapping an around her as she laid her head on his chest. They lay there in a comfortable silence for a moment, listening to the sound of the others soft breathing.

Ana shifted her head to look up at Harry finally, unable to keep silent any longer. "Well?" she asked softly and with a tinge of reluctance.

Harry opened his eyes and stared down into her own. "Nothing new," he replied with a sigh.

Ana frowned slightly. "Not even about...?" she trailed off, and Harry knew that she meant her parents. He shook his head sadly. She lowered her eyes and nodded slowly, trying her hardest to hide the worry she felt at this answer.

Harry lifted her chin with his hand and stroked her hair behind her ear slowly. "Everything's going to be fine, Ana," he whispered. "I won't let anything happen to you..."

She looked into his eyes and saw the sincerity that lay in them. "I know," she said softly.

Harry smiled and studied her for a moment. Ana couldn't help but smile too. "What? Do I have something on my face?" she asked with a small laugh.

"Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?" he said, smiling more than ever.

Ana blushed a deep crimson. "Um...no. I-I don't think so..." she stammered, feeling embarrassed by his intense gaze.

He trailed a finger down her cheek with a soft touch that sent shivers running up and down her spine. "Beautiful," he whispered again.

She couldn't help the pleased smile that came to her face then. No one had ever said that to her in her entire life. With Harry she felt more beautiful and wanted than she ever could have before. The chaste kiss he placed upon her lips then confirmed all of this in her mind, and it wasn't long before she fell asleep in his arms, the sound of his heartbeat lulling her into her dreams.

But Harry lay there for a long time afterwards, staring down into the sleeping face of the girl that had turned his world upside down. The girl that made him so unbelievably happy he had a hard time convincing himself that she was real. But if Ana was anything, she was real, he thought. More real to him than any other girl could be. More understanding, more giving, more innocent and full of laughter.

But she was strong too. She had gotten through all those horrible years before she had found herself in his arms. Quite literally, he thought with a smile as he remembered the day he discovered her. Who could have known that that day would change his life so thoroughly?

He gently caressed her cheek once more. Yes, she was strong, but she also needed him he knew. And as he stared down into her peaceful face, he made a vow then and there that he would protect her, no matter what happened.

He placed one last soft kiss on her temple and pulled her closer to him, laying there until sleep finally claimed him.

[illegible]

“Ana! Ana wake up!”

Ana groaned and buried her face deeper into her pillow, but the hushed, excited voice refused to cease.

“Ana...” Harry whispered loudly yet again, grinning. He leaned over and placed a kiss on her nose. “Wakey wakey...” he laughed.

Ana, still half-asleep, grabbed an extra pillow and would have struck Harry in the head with it if he hadn't grabbed it from her hand. He laughed again and shook her. "It's Christmas, love. Wake up!"

Ana popped one eye open and stared at Harry in confusion, her mind still addled with sleep. "What?" she said, lifting her head up off the pillow and brushing a few strands of hair out of her face. It was only then she realized where she was. "This isn't my bed..." she said, almost to herself.

Harry laughed again at her confused face. "You're cute in the morning," he said, looking at her mussed up hair with a grin.

Ana blushed, but it was more because she realized she had slept in Harry's bed last night. She usually would return to her own room after waiting up for him, but this time she must have fallen asleep on accident. But Harry seemed to think nothing of it...and it had been nice lying there with his arms around her. Besides, she trusted Harry. She knew he wouldn't do anything she wasn't ready for.

"Christmas?" she asked with a grin.

"Yes, Christmas! What the bloody hell do you think I've been going on about?" Harry laughed, pulling her out of bed with minimum effort. She laughed and got out of bed to go clean up. Harry waited for her, and when she was done, they walked into the living room together where Sirius and Lupin were waiting.

The rest of the morning was spent opening gifts. Laughter and chatter soon filled the house as this went on. Ana watched in fascination as everyone opened their presents. She'd never experienced Christmas before, had never gotten a present, had never known the excitement it could bring. Because of this, she was more than happy to sit on the sidelines and watch as the rest of them exchanged gifts. She only wished she had had the money to buy everyone a present, for she would have done so in a heartbeat. They had all been so kind to her...

As her mind wandered, she didn't notice when Harry walked out of the room quietly. Sirius and Lupin were exchanging knowing smiles

and soon Harry returned, looking as though he was holding something behind his back.

“Ana?”

She snapped out of her daze and turned to look at Harry expectantly, eyeing him suspiciously when she saw he was hiding something. He neared her with a grin. Ana was about to ask what the heck was going on when a soft ‘mew’ cut her short. Harry rolled his eyes and laughed as he brought his hand out from behind him. There, cupped in his large palm, was a baby kitten, a soft light gray in color.

“Couldn’t wait till I showed you to her, could you?” Harry said to it, laughing once more when it ‘mewed’ again in response.

Ana’s eyes widened at the sight of the small animal, her mouth hanging open in surprise. “What is it?” she said finally, her eyes glued to the kitten.

“It’s a cat,” Harry laughed.

“No...that’s not what I meant. I mean, why do you have it?” she asked, though she was starting to get a good idea.

“I bought her for you, of course,” Harry said, grinning.

“For me?” Ana said in disbelief.

“Yes, you! Wanna hold her?” Harry asked, placing the kitten in Ana’s lap gently when she nodded.

Ana smiled as she pet the cat slowly, and it purred in response. “Harry! I don’t know what to say. She’s wonderful! But you shouldn’t have...I don’t have anything for you...” she trailed off sadly.

“I wanted to. And you’re all the present I’ll ever need,” he smiled warmly at her. “Do you like her? I thought she could keep you company at Hogwarts since you’re allowed to have them as pets...I didn’t know if that’s what you would want though...” he trailed off unsurely.

“Harry, I love her! She’s so cute,” Ana exclaimed as she smiled at the kitten once again. It was eyeing the ornaments on the tree eagerly. “Where did you find the time to get her?” she asked.

“Went with Lupin to Diagon Alley when you and Tonks were chatting the other day. I saw her and thought of you,” he grinned.

“Thank you, Harry. You’re too wonderful to me,” she told him, gratitude shining in her eyes. Harry merely winked at her, and Ana pulled him close to kiss him on the cheek.

Lupin chuckled at the sight of the both of them, and Sirius grinned. The grin was soon wiped from his face however, when the kitten somehow found its way to the floor and started batting its paws at the shiny ornaments on the tree. He scowled slightly as he stared at it, muttering something about ‘hating cats’.

Harry laughed, and Ana watched with smiling eyes as the kitten played with a gold ornament that now lay on the floor.

“So what are you going to name the little bugger,” Sirius asked as he watched the kitten contemptuously.

“Sirius!” Ana said reproachfully, laughing. She turned to study the kitten once more, tilting her head to the side in thought. She then moved to sit beside the animal on the floor, pushing a red ornament towards it to play with. But the kitten wanted nothing to do with it, instead opting to play with a gold ribbon that lay discarded near the opened presents.

“Likes its gold, doesn’t it?” Lupin murmured amusedly.

Ana beamed as a bright smile lit her face. “That’s it! Goldie!”

“Goldie? You’re going to name a gray cat Goldie?” Sirius asked, eyebrows raised.

“Yup!” Ana laughed, picking the kitten up and holding her up in front of her. “It’s perfect!”

Sirius shook his head, laughing, and Harry grinned at her. Before anyone could say anything else, however, a loud crash was heard from downstairs. All three men shot up from their seated positions, wands appearing in their hands instantly. Ana looked towards the door, alarmed, getting up as well with Goldie still in her arms. Harry moved closer to her, his eyes never leaving the doorway.

Sirius surged forward swiftly towards the door, but was stopped when Lupin laid a hand on his arm. Before Sirius could ask what Lupin thought he was doing, a shouting could be heard calling out for Lupin in a slurred voice that was soon drowned out by the shrill shrieking of the portrait of Mrs. Black.

“Bloody hell...” Lupin muttered.

Not a moment later, a drunken Mundungus came stumbling through the door, looking for all appearances to be more haggard than ever. His eyes swept the room, stopping when they landed on Lupin.

“Remus! Jus’ the man I bin longin’ to see,” he said, stumbling a bit as he stepped closer.

“What do you want, Mundungus? It’s Christmas,” Lupin sighed. Sirius was glaring at the man, apparently disappointed that it hadn’t been some Death Eater that he could have taken out.

At the reminder of his visit, Mundungus frowned. “Wha’s this I hear about takin’ me off the Carrows case?” he said angrily, apparently not noticing that Ana was in the room. She shifted uncomfortably at the mention of her parents.

“It’s for the best. You were getting too attached to it,” Lupin said calmly.

It was true. After Hermione and Ron had told him about what they had overheard in the alleyway that day in Hogsmeade, Lupin had decided to take Mundungus off the case to be on the safe side. He’d had a bad feeling from the get go about Mudungus’ involvement. The man seemed far too adamant about helping the Order out with it. It wasn’t in his character to be like that. Something was just off about it.

“What?! That’s bollocks that is! I’m helping out jus’ like everyone else. I ‘ave contacts! You know this, Remus!” he said, even more irate than before.

“I’m sorry, Mundungus. Dumbledore agrees. We’ll contact you if we need anything,” Lupin said, still as calm as before. There was a finality to his voice now, however, as if implying the discussion was over.

Mundungus looked as though he was about to explode. He gritted his teeth and was about to say something more when his eyes fell on Ana. A strange gleam appeared in them, but it vanished instantly when Harry narrowed his eyes at him and stepped closer to Ana still.

Mundungus looked around at them all once more. “I’ll be goin’ then. Apparently I’m not welcome...” he slurred.

“What gave you that impression?” Sirius muttered, still glaring.

Mundungus clenched his jaw and turned around quickly, nearly falling over as he exited the room. Lupin breathed a sigh of relief, and Sirius continued to stare out the door with a sour look on his face.

“Old cad finally went barmy...” Sirius mumbled finally, shaking his head.

Lupin merely frowned, but Harry was too busy looking at Ana to notice much else. She still seemed a little uncomfortable.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

She looked up at him and nodded. “Yeah...”

She didn’t tell him that the look Mundungus had given her gave her the chills. Goldie gave a soft ‘*mew*’, and Ana realized she still held the small kitten in her arms.

“I think she wants some milk,” Ana said, smiling down at her new pet.

“Good idea,” Harry said, smiling too. “I’ll go with you.”

They made their way down to the kitchen, both silently thinking about the situation that had just occurred. A feeling of unease crept over the both of them, but it slowly faded as the day wore on. They figured it was Christmas. Not exactly a time to be worried and fretful.

When night fell, Ana found herself smiling as she lay on Harry's bed, watching Goldie pounce around on top of the covers. Harry came in after saying goodnight to Sirius and Lupin. He grinned at the sight of Ana playing with her new cat on his bed and joined the both of them as he lay down beside her. He pulled her close to him and sighed contentedly as she snuggled deeper into his embrace. Goldie climbed up to rest next to them.

“Thank you Harry,” Ana whispered.

“For what?” he frowned.

“For today. For Goldie. For everything,” she shrugged, lowering her eyes.

“You’re welcome,” he grinned, moving to place a soft kiss on her lips. “Happy Christmas, Ana,” he whispered when they parted.

She smiled. "Happy Christmas Harry."

And it *was* a happy one, Ana thought to herself afterwards. The happiest Christmas she'd ever had, despite the run in with Mundungus. That might not have been saying much, seeing as she'd technically never had a Christmas before, but this one meant a lot to her. And deep down she hoped there would be many more Christmases with Harry to come.

They fell asleep in each other's arms not long after, small smiles of content adorning their youthful faces.

[illegible]

AN: Hello lovely people! Next chapter for you! I hope it's okay. I know it's super long...I just hope it's not too boring or anything. I'm sorta

nervous about it. Romance. Bah. Haha. It was just giving me some problems, but again, I hope you like it.

I need to thank some people again for reviewing the last chapter: blueclouds96, blackshadow1006, Inasane and Logical, Amber, Skiff-the-thief, LettaR999, StreetFame, The Lost Tear, KRP, SoA, emoscreamo, darthme1011, fufu a.k.a speechless, Kazama Naruto, and Illusion to Life.

Thank all of you SO much! I'm sorry I haven't had time to respond to each of you personally. But I really appreciate your comments. They make my day.

Reviews are welcome, and thanks to all my readers and past reviewers once again! I heart you guys. Okay, that's it. Have a great day!

Chapter 17

It was shortly after they returned to Hogwarts when the nightmares began.

Christmas break was over. The blissful, happy days Harry and Ana had spent at Grimmauld Place had come to an end, and they arrived back to school semi-reluctantly along with the rest of the students.

Sirius, however, had been the saddest to see them go, and the two felt bad for leaving him. He'd be alone once again. But at least he had the occasional Order meeting to attend, not that that was very good company given the subjects of said meetings. There was hardly ever any good news nowadays. In fact, things in the wizarding world seemed to be getting worse.

Dark Marks were appearing above the homes of witches and wizards more and more frequently. There were reports of mysterious disappearances of Muggles and magic folk alike. The Ministry was going crazy trying to deal with everything. It was no longer possible or wise to keep things from the public, and now that the holidays were over it seemed to be the main topic of discussion at Hogwarts.

Ana, however, had her own personal problems to deal with. It had been strange returning to her own bed once again in her dorm room. She had taken a liking to falling asleep with Harry's arms around her...it had made her feel safe. But she chastised herself for this, feeling foolish for letting it get to her. Things had been moving too fast. She shouldn't be feeling like she couldn't go to sleep unless he was there with her...She shouldn't be feeling so alone whenever he wasn't around.

She told herself to get a grip. That it wasn't a big deal. She was acting silly again. They were at Hogwarts once more, and nothing could happen to her as long as she was there. But all thoughts of safety and comfort soon came to an end when the nightmares began.

They were always the same...

She stood in the middle of a small clearing in a forest. The same forest she had spent her first terrifying moments of freedom in those many months ago. It was cold and dark...she could see her breaths coming out in irregular gasps.

An awful, low, and terrible laugh echoed around her. She spun around to see where the noise had come from, fear clutching her heart. Her terror increased to an almost impossible level when she came face to face with her father.

He was sneering at her and laughing that terrible laugh still...she found she couldn't move. The fear paralyzed her.

"We're coming for you Anabelle," he said with a terrifying grin. His voice still echoed around her chillingly...she wanted to scream...

His grin widened, and he moved to the side, making visible the scene behind him. The scene that would haunt Ana for the rest of her life...

"Harry..."

He lay on the dark earth before her...bloody and near death. Her mother stood above him, wand outstretched...the same awful grin on her face as her father.

"NO!" Ana tried to run to him, but her father grabbed her and held her in a vice-like grip. She couldn't move...

Harry was breathing raggedly and looked up at her with pain-filled eyes. His scar stood out like a beacon against his pale forehead.

"Ana..." he croaked. "Why?"

"No! Harry!!" she screamed. "Let go of me!!" Tears streamed down her face in rivers as she tried to escape her father's hold...

"Look what you did, Anabelle...you did this..." her father whispered in her ear, a tone of glee evident in his voice. "Just like Mr. Brighton...it's all your fault..."

“No...” she whimpered as she continued to struggle. She was losing this fight. Harry was fading...

“Let me prove it to you...” Alecto grinned again.

She couldn't stop what happened next. It was as though something was controlling her...forcing her. Her wand was suddenly in her hand...she was raising it slowly...her arm leveled at Harry's form...she heard the words come out of her mouth before she knew what was happening. A jet of green light lit up the clearing before finding its mark.

Harry's lifeless eyes stared back up at her as her father's voice echoed in her mind...

“We're coming for you...”

Those words rang in her ears even as she sprang from her sleep to a sitting position, gasping for breath. Sweat covered her entire body as her chest heaved in and out. Her face was sticky with dried tears. But her heart...her heart felt as though someone had torn it to pieces. It ached so badly she almost couldn't concentrate on anything else. It felt broken.

This is what she would go through every night. The dreams came with a chilling consistency. Goldie would 'mew' in protest at the interruption of her own sleep next to Ana. The kitten would get up and move to the foot of the bed where there was no danger of being disturbed and immediately fall back to sleep.

Ana, however, usually had no such luck. She'd lie there for a long time afterwards, too shaken to fall back asleep. She couldn't get the image of Harry's still and unmoving form out of her head. And her father's words played relentlessly in her mind, over and over...

But it didn't do to dwell on them. They were just dreams...and when the morning light seeped into her room; the darkness of her thoughts was slowly pushed away. The pang of guilt and fear, however, never quite left her. But the days were admittedly much better than the nights, and seeing Harry's smiling and very much alive face helped immensely, of course.

Because of this, Ana took to waking up extremely early, which usually meant she'd get down to breakfast before Harry did. It was on one such morning she walked into the Great Hall, sitting down at the near empty Gryffindor table. She was exhausted, but she had grown used to feeling tired. Because of her dreams, she tried her hardest to put off going to sleep until very late at night, only to wake up at the crack of dawn usually. It was worth it to her. Anything was better than living in her nightmares...

She had just begun to butter her toast when a voice stopped her short.

"Hi there."

Ana looked up and was slightly surprised to see a girl she had never met before smiling at her. She was the very pretty Asian girl Ana recognized as being in Ravenclaw. She had seen her in class a few times but had never really spoken to her before. Ana gave a hesitant smile in response and desperately tried to remember the girl's name, not wanting to seem rude.

"Cho Chang," the girl said with a grin, as if sensing Ana's struggle. "We've never met before. Your name is Ana, isn't it?" she asked politely.

"Oh, hello. And yes, it is Ana," she smiled.

"Mind if I sit down?" Cho asked.

"No. Not at all," Ana said.

She watched as Cho took a seat across from her at the table and couldn't help but wonder what all this was about. But she seemed nice enough, even if Ana couldn't help but feel a little intimidated by the girl's obvious beauty. She suddenly was overcome by self-consciousness and tucked a stray strand of her dark hair behind her ear, knowing it didn't look nearly as perfect as Cho's glossy, straight, jet black locks.

"I know we haven't talked before, but I just wanted to have a little chat with you," Cho said, the polite, prim smile still across her porcelain

face. Ana smiled and opened her mouth to respond but was cut short when Cho started to speak again.

“So you and Harry are a couple now, huh? My, you don’t waste any time, do you?” Cho said, her smile turning a bit more sly than polite now.

Ana’s own smile faltered slightly at this. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing,” Cho said. “It’s just you’re still rather new here, aren’t you? Don’t you think it was bit too fast to jump into a relationship? I mean, not that I blame you, Harry is a *great* guy...” she trailed off, still smiling politely.

Even though everything about Cho’s manner was kind, Ana couldn’t help feeling a bit uncomfortable. She also didn’t like the way Cho had said ‘great’ as though she knew something Ana didn’t.

“Oh...uh, well—“

“So do you feel guilty at all?” Cho asked, interrupting her yet again.

“Guilty?” Ana said, furrowing her brows slightly.

“Well, for breaking up the Golden Trio, I mean. You must feel *awful*,” Cho said, sympathy in her features.

Ana paled and tried to work her mouth but found there were no words.

“Oh! Unless it wasn’t you...” Cho said hurriedly. “I mean, I just assumed...It happened around the same time you got here, and Harry has been spending so much time with you. It’s all everyone has been talking about, you know. That’s why I broke it off with Harry when we dated...I didn’t want to come between him and Ron and Hermione. I’m sorry, I should have known someone as nice as you wouldn’t do a horrible thing like that.”

Cho smiled again, showing off her perfect pearly whites, and all Ana could do was sit there completely at a loss as to what to say. There were far too many emotions and thoughts swirling through her right

now to even begin sorting them out. And an overwhelming feeling of guilt was overpowering them all.

“So why exactly aren’t Harry and Hermione friends anymore? If you don’t mind me asking that is...” Cho smiled, looking at Ana expectantly.

Again, Ana was struck quite speechless. What was she supposed to say? Tell her that she was really a Carrows? That she was the real reason why Harry and Hermione weren’t on speaking terms anymore?

“Sticking your nose in other people’s business again, Chang?”

Like a godsend the voice cut into the conversation, saving Ana from giving a response she didn’t even have to Cho’s questioning. Ana looked up to see who she recognized as Ron’s sister, Ginny. The red head had her hands on her hips as she glared down at Cho with one raised eyebrow.

Cho’s perfect smile faltered slightly. “What do you mean, Ginny? I was just trying to have a conversation with Ana here. I don’t really see how that’s any of *your* business.”

“Why don’t you go back to your gaggle of friends over there before I hex that fake smile right off your face? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m quite good at that,” Ginny said with her own smile, brandishing her wand almost lovingly.

The perfect smile on Cho’s face was now gone completely and was replaced with a look of complete shock. When Cho simply continued to stare open-mouthed at the red head before her, Ginny heaved a tired sigh.

“Listen, it’s really not that difficult.” Here Ginny began to speak slowly as though she were talking to a three year old. “*This* is the Gryffindor table,” she said, gesturing the table with a wide sweep of her hand. “And *that* is the Ravenclaw table.” She pointed across the Hall to where the table was located.

Several people were now watching the exchange with amused looks on their faces. A few nearby Gryffindors were laughing quietly. Ginny had grown quite infamous for her lack of control when it came to telling people off. She had gained quite a lot of friends and admirers that way. Not to mention a few enemies as well.

“Gry-ffin-dor,” Ginny said slowly, pointing at the table in front of her. “Ra-ven-claw,” she pointed to Cho’s table. When she was done she flashed a bright grin in Cho’s direction and tilted her head to the side as she looked at her expectantly.

Cho, it seemed, finally took the hint and arose from the table in an affronted manner. She gave Ginny a murderous glare and turned to retreat to her own table with a huff of indignation. Ginny just continued to grin and gave Cho a wave as she took the seat she had just vacated.

Ana, who had watched the entire exchange between the two girls, now looked at Ginny in amazement.

“Wow...um, thanks!” she said, finally finding her voice again.

“No problem,” Ginny smiled at her. “I’ve actually been dying to tell that girl off for a while now. I should thank you for providing me with the opportunity,” she laughed.

Ana laughed too and watched as Ginny started filling her plate. She had spoken to her briefly a few times in the past, mostly whenever Harry or Ron were around. She’d never really had a chance to talk to her alone, however. Ginny was on the Quidditch team and spent most of her time with her boyfriend and fellow teammate Dean Thomas. Harry had told Ana that the two had been dating since last year.

“You know, normally I wouldn’t mind if people from other Houses came to sit at our table, but I overheard all those things she was saying to you and had to step in. Honestly, the *nerve* of that girl...” Ginny said angrily, sending a glare in Cho’s direction.

“Well, I appreciate it. I wasn’t quite sure how to respond to her,” Ana said with a small smile.

"Listen, don't let her get to you. She's just jealous," Ginny said, turning once more to Ana.

"Jealous?" Ana asked, confused. Why would Cho be jealous of her?

"Well, yeah. A lot of girls are actually. Don't tell me you haven't noticed all the glares you've been getting?" Ginny asked, furrowing her brows.

"Er...well, no I haven't actually," Ana said with a frown. "Are you sure that's true? Why would they be jealous of me?"

"Cause you're Harry's girlfriend of course!" Ginny laughed. "You really haven't noticed? Boy, if it were me I'd have a detention every day for all the fights I'd get into. The girls here are all so silly," she said with a shake of her head, taking a drink from her pumpkin juice.

"So...Cho is jealous because Harry is my boyfriend?" Ana asked hesitantly. It still felt odd to call him that.

"Well...that's part of it, yeah. It's true that Cho used to date Harry...well, actually I don't even know if you'd really call what they did 'dating,' but anyways she didn't break it off with him like she told you. He broke it off with her when he realized what a snob she was." Ginny threw another glare in Cho's direction as she said this. The Ravenclaw pretended not to notice, however, and continued whispering with her friends.

"That's another thing," Ginny continued. "Don't believe that crap she was telling you. All of it was complete bollocks. She could have cared less about breaking up Ron, Harry and Hermione. And you and Harry aren't moving too fast. You two have spent almost every waking moment together ever since the beginning of the school year, and you only just now got together. Heck, it only took Dean and I a week...wonder what Cho would have to say about that..." she trailed off with a small grin, looking as though she wished Cho *would* say something about it so she could hex her into oblivion.

Ana knew Ginny was trying to reassure her about Cho's cutting remarks, but she wasn't quite convinced.

"You know...I never really gave it much thought until recently. Harry and I may have rushed things a bit now that I think about it..." Ana said, focusing on the wood of the table in front of her with a small frown. But if they had rushed into things, why did it feel so right?

"Ana, don't worry about it," Ginny said, reaching out to pat her hand. "You two are perfect for each other. I know we haven't spoken much, but I don't think I've ever seen Harry this happy before. He really is a great guy...there's one thing the dragon managed not to lie about," she grinned.

Ana laughed and nodded. "He is rather wonderful..."

Ginny smiled at the wistful look that had appeared on Ana's face. Once upon a time she had thought that way about Harry. But it turned out to be just a schoolgirl's crush and nothing more. They weren't meant to be. Her and Harry were just friends. She'd always see him as another older brother, always there if she ever needed him. Besides, she was much too happy with Dean to even think about anyone else.

"See?" Ginny smiled at her. "And don't feel guilty about Harry and Hermione not talking much anymore. Ron refuses to tell me the reason behind it, but I'm sure it wasn't your fault. Trust me, they'll be friends again in no time. They've been in arguments before and it's always turned out all right in the end," she said soothingly before turning back to the breakfast on her plate, and therefore missing Ana's immediate change in demeanor.

She swallowed and tried to smile but found she was incapable of doing so at the moment. Once again she focused on the tabletop as though it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

She tried to ignore the guilt that began to gnaw at her, but found it futile. It *was* her fault. All of it was...Ginny didn't know this, however. In fact, none of the other students knew the real reason behind the fight between Harry and Hermione. Ana had never given it much thought before, but Cho's words came back to her quite suddenly...

It's all everyone has been talking about, you know...

Ana could only imagine the kinds of rumors that must be flying around as to the reason behind the “break up” of the Golden Trio. And if Cho’s words held any truth at all it meant that most people believed Ana was to blame.

And they’re right, she thought morosely as she pushed her eggs around her plate.

Her thoughts were broken, however, when a flustered Harry threw himself into the seat beside her, nearly knocking her off it in the process.

“Harry! What the—”

“Sorry, love. Morning!” he said hurriedly before kissing her quickly on the cheek. He then reached across her to rummage through her bag that sat on the table.

“Hey! What are you doing?” she asked in disbelief.

Harry looked slightly wild, as though he had just leapt out of bed. His robes were wrinkled and his hair was messier than she had ever seen it before. She watched wide-eyed as he began taking book after book out of her bag, finally giving a cry of triumph when he found her Potions book. He pulled it towards him and flipped through the pages quickly; completely oblivious to Ana’s slightly shocked face and Ginny’s amused one.

“Harry, may I ask what you are doing?” Ana finally said when it was obvious that Harry hadn’t planned on explaining.

He looked up from the book in surprise as though he had forgotten she was there. “What? Oh. We have a Potions test in less than an hour. Did you forget?” he asked.

“Um...no, I didn’t forget Harry. I’ve been studying all week,” she said, giving him a strange look. Her mouth fell open a moment later as she seemed to realize something. “Don’t tell me you haven’t studied for it! Harry, I told you last night to look over the chapter!”

"Yeah, well...I, uh, fell asleep earlier than I'd planned. And I seem to have, er, misplaced my book, anyways. That's why I need yours," he said. "You didn't blow it up, did you?" he asked with a laugh, but stopped when she gave him a hard glare.

"That is not funny. Harry, I can't believe you! There's no way you're going to be able to cram all of the information in that chapter in less than an hour..." she told him exasperatedly.

Harry opened his mouth to respond but was cut off by Seamus who had just vacated his seat further down the table to approach them.

"Harry! Boy did you miss a show," he grinned at him before turning to Ginny. "I thought you were going to *kill* her, Gin. That was brilliant!" he laughed.

Ginny smiled and Seamus gave them all a wave of goodbye as he walked off and out of the Hall. Harry was staring at Ginny with a look of complete confusion on his face.

"What? Who did you almost kill? What was he talking about?" he asked her.

"Oh...um...no one. Heh, heh," Ginny replied nervously. It occurred to her that Harry might get upset when he heard about the incident.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously and turned to see if Ana knew anything, but she was staring determinedly at the tabletop again. He peered at them, thinking they were being far too silent for his liking. Something was up.

"Ginny..." he trailed off, looking at the red head expectantly. When she continued to say nothing, he tried again. "Ginny, what happened?"

Knowing Harry wouldn't let her get away with not telling him and also knowing that he'd probably find out soon anyway, she relented.

"I...I just gave Cho a bit of a telling off is all. It was no big deal, really," she said hesitantly.

“Cho?” Harry furrowed his brows in confusion. “Why?”

“Oh...er...well,” she said unsurely.

Ana looked up and gave her a pleading look, but all Ginny could focus on was Harry’s expectant face. He had a right to know. So, with an apologetic glance sent in Ana’s direction, Ginny turned once more to Harry and the words rushed out of her in quick succession.

“It was only because of the things she was saying to Ana. I honestly would have just ignored her in any other situation, but she was being such a jerk, and I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing so I threatened to hex her if she didn’t go back to her own table. You should have heard the things she said Harry, I mean, trying to make Ana feel guilty for going out with you—”

“*What?*” Harry interrupted incredulously. He pushed the Potions book away, all thoughts of studying forgotten, and turned to Ana in concern. “Is that true, Ana?”

Ana sighed and shot Ginny one last look of reproach (who was making a show of busying herself with her breakfast) before turning to Harry.

“Er...well, yes, sort of,” she said.

“Well, what did she say?” he asked eagerly.

“Harry, really, it was nothing. It’s not that big of a deal...”

“Ana, what did she say?” he asked again, quietly this time. He looked at her with gentle eyes full of concern. Eyes that Ana couldn’t say no to.

“She just...made some comments about how fast we got together and...asked if I felt guilty for breaking up you, Ron and Hermione...that’s all,” she replied in a small voice, wanting to make it seem like it hadn’t really affected her but failing horribly of course.

"That's what I was afraid of," Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair angrily. "You don't do you? You know that wasn't your fault, right?" he asked worriedly.

Ana hesitated. "Yeah...yeah, I know," she said finally, averting her eyes from his own.

It was a lie, of course. She had lied to him. The girl who hated lying more than anything else had just lied to the person she cared about the most. It felt awful, but she didn't want him to worry about her. Besides, this wasn't exactly the time or place to discuss it.

"Ana, I'm so sorry. I should have warned you she might do that. I honestly didn't think she'd have the nerve to come right up to you and say something though..." Harry said quickly.

"Harry, it's fine, really. Like I said, it was no big deal. Ginny took care of it, anyways," Ana said, looking towards the red head with a small smile.

"Who me? Nah..." Ginny grinned mischievously. Ana laughed and Harry sent Ginny a grateful smile. "Listen, you two crazy kids have fun, okay? I gotta go meet Dean. Be good," she winked at them.

Harry and Ana waved her goodbye and watched as she walked away. Ana couldn't help but laugh again when she saw Ginny throw Cho a goodbye wave as well with a very sweet smile on her face.

"You sure you're okay?" Harry asked quietly, turning back to her.

"I'm fine. Consequences of dating a Potter, I guess," she grinned.

"I'm worth it," Harry replied with a rakish smile before stealing a kiss.

"I suppose," Ana shrugged after pulling away from him. She smiled again at his affronted look and laughed when he growled and pulled her to him again.

"I thought you had to study!" she said with a grin.

“Study? No idea what you’re talking about, love,” he said as he kissed her again.

“Well, while I’m flattered you find me more interesting than Potions, I really think you should at least *try* to care about the test,” Ana said, gently pushing him away.

She had just become painfully aware of the stares they were getting, most of them from girls. And they were actually more like glares than stares. It made her feel slightly uncomfortable to say the least.

“Fine,” Harry sighed. “But only cause you told me to,” he grinned.

Ana laughed and pushed her book back towards him. Being around Harry made her feel better about everything that had happened. His presence never failed to calm her. But try as she might, Ana couldn’t completely ignore what Cho had said.

Almost as soon as the thought came to her, however, it was pushed to the background as her father’s chilling voice rang in her ears once more. She had bigger things to worry about than a jealous Ravenclaw...

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It was a few nights later when Harry was making his way back to the Gryffindor common room after having a chat with Lupin. He had visited the older man in his office to ask if there had been any news concerning the Order. Harry had begun making it a point to be brought up to date on the organization’s affairs, wanting to be in the know when it came to Voldemort and his movements.

Unfortunately there really hadn’t been anything new to report. Attacks were still happening every day and little progress was being made in the capture of the Carrows, or any other Death Eater for that matter. Harry had asked about the Order’s strategies and whether or not they could improve them, not realizing that the time had flown by as they talked.

Now it past the time students were allowed to be out of bed and Harry, not having his invisibility cloak handy, had to make sure to sneak back to his dormitory as quickly and quietly as possible. The last thing he needed was to be caught by Filch and given a detention.

It was with this thought in mind that he looked behind him in order to make sure Filch wasn't around anywhere. Satisfied that the dark hall was indeed empty, Harry turned a corner only to ram unceremoniously into another person. The impact knocked him back slightly and through his disorientation he distinctly heard the 'oof' of a female.

"Hermione?"

Harry stared at the bushy haired girl before him in surprise. Hermione, too, seemed slightly caught off guard by the fact that Harry had just run into her. Their surprise didn't last long, however, and was quickly replaced by discomfort over the awkward situation. They stood there for a moment in a thick silence, both unsure as to how to proceed. Harry broke it first.

"Er...sorry about that. You okay?" he asked hesitantly.

Seeming to have remembered that she was supposed to be very angry with Harry still, Hermione affected her "Prefect stance" and gave him a stony look.

"It's past curfew," she said stiffly.

Harry looked at her in disbelief.

"What, are you going to give me a detention?" he asked derisively.

Hermione's eyes narrowed slightly but she said nothing. Instead she gave him one last scathing look before stepping around him to continue her rounds. She had only gotten a few steps when Harry sighed and stopped her.

"Hermione, wait..." he said, his voice taking a softer tone than before. "Can I talk to you?" he asked.

His insides were squirming and uncomfortable didn't even begin to cover what he was feeling right then, but he'd been meaning to talk to her. He'd told himself not to put it off any longer. Now was as good a time as any...

She halted and turned to him expectantly, her mouth still forming a thin line. Harry sighed again and ran a hand through his hair.

"This isn't much fun, is it?" he said finally, smiling sadly.

Hermione's face softened at the unexpected question and she shifted slightly, saying nothing.

"Hermione, I'm not going to lie, it's been really tough not talking to you these past couple of months. I mean, Ron and I...well, we talk all the time, you know that...but it just isn't the same without you. It just...feels wrong, is all," he shrugged with a frown.

Hermione continued to say nothing, choosing to stare at the ground near her feet rather than meet Harry's eyes. A part of her was screaming at herself to agree with him, to tell him that it had been torture for her too, that she wished they could all be friends once again...but she remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

"Anyway, I'm sure you know about Ana and I...how we're together now..." he trailed off. Hermione stiffened slightly but gave him a nod to show him she did know.

"It's just...I really care about her, Hermione. When I'm around her I feel happier than I've ever felt before. And when I'm not around her...I feel hollow," he stopped, sighing again.

Hermione glanced up at him and was taken aback by how sincere he looked. He really meant it...

"She makes me forget I'm...well, that I'm...the Boy Who Lived, I guess," he said with a small smile. Hermione opened her mouth to speak then but he cut her off before she could.

"And yes, I know that it's something I can't forget. Trust me. I know what I have to do, Hermione. I'm ready for it. I haven't forgotten about

Voldemort or the...the prophecy. I know that I can never really be normal. But it's nice to...to have someone that can make me feel that way...if only for a little while. She sees beyond this," he said, gesturing to his scar.

"She sees me," he said quietly. "And I see her. For the giving, kind-hearted person she is...not for the daughter of the Carrows."

Hermione swallowed and cast her eyes downward once more. She was starting to feel guilty and sorry for ever getting into this fight in the first place, but the words to express those feelings wouldn't come.

"You'd like her," Harry went on with a smile. "You really would. She reminds me of you actually. She's the only other person I've ever known who's actually read *Hogwarts, A History* in its entirety," he laughed. Hermione gave a small, almost imperceptible grin despite herself.

"I just...I just wish you'd give her a chance. I know you're worried about me, and I appreciate it more than I can say...but you've got to trust me on this one, Hermione," Harry pleaded gently.

Hermione shifted again and averted her eyes once more. She'd never felt more conflicted in her entire life. The girl who always knew the answer to everything was suddenly at a complete and utter loss as to how to proceed.

"Listen, you don't have to say anything now. Just...just think about it, okay?" Harry asked, as though sensing her struggle. It had been a miracle he'd gotten her to listen this far anyway.

She hesitated a moment and took a deep breath before nodding mutely.

Harry gave her one last small smile and nodded as well. "Goodnight, Hermione," he said in parting. She watched in silence as he walked away, finally finding her voice when he had long since disappeared from sight.

"Goodnight Harry."

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The next day, Ana was slowly making her way back to the common room after a few hours of gruesome studying in the library. She was feeling completely exhausted. The lack of sleep was starting to take its toll on her, and with all the amount of homework and studying she had to do, she was surprised she could still walk.

She gave the Fat Lady the password when she finally reached the portrait hole and walked into the common room. It only took her a moment to spot Harry sitting on the couch, seemingly deep in discussion about the next Quidditch match with Dean and Ron, who both sat in armchairs before him.

She smiled and quietly began to walk past them, not wanting to disturb their discussion, but just as she had almost made it past the couch, she yelped when she felt a tug on her arm.

Harry had grabbed her and pulled her around the couch and into his lap with startling efficiency. She looked at him in shock, but the shock deepened when Harry merely continued talking to Dean and Ron as though nothing had happened, still deep in "Quidditch mode."

"Harry," she said, but he simply ignored her and kept talking. Dean and Ron exchanged amused glances but continued to listen to Harry speak.

Ana tried getting up but he kept a firm grip on her waist. She sighed in frustration as it soon became quite apparent that she wasn't going anywhere.

"You see, I think our main problem is our offense," Harry said calmly. "Now, that's not to say you're doing anything wrong, Dean. It's just that the Ravenclaw beaters are vicious this year, which means you've really got to work on your reflexes."

"Yeah, that makes sense. I'm still aching from that last match with them," Dean grimaced.

Ana tried again to escape, thinking that maybe he was distracted, but she felt him pull her even closer if that were at all possible. She sent Ron a pleading look, but he just grinned and shrugged as if to say there was nothing he could do about it.

The boys continued to talk for a little while after that. Harry still hadn't acknowledged Ana's presence despite the fact she was on his lap throughout the entire discussion. She kept begrudgingly quiet and soon found she was having a hard time keeping her eyes open. She was so tired...

"Ana?"

With a jolt she opened her eyes, disoriented for a moment. It took her a second to remind herself that she was in the common room, still on Harry's lap. Dean and Ron were nowhere to be seen, however.

"Where'd they go?" she mumbled as she sat up straighter. Her back ached from the awkward position she'd been in.

"They left to go down to lunch a little bit ago," he replied quietly, looking at her with a hint of concern in his eyes. "You fell asleep," he smiled.

"I did? Oh..." she frowned.

"Sorry if our chat was boring you," he said with a grin.

"Well, it's not as if I had much of a choice but to listen to it," she told him with a smirk.

Harry laughed. "You can get up now if you want to. I won't stop you."

"No, actually, I think I'm quite fine where I am thanks. I hope your legs are numb and aching right now," she smiled impishly.

"Mine? Nope. They're just fine as a matter of fact. I can still feel my toes," he grinned.

Ana laughed and rested her head on his shoulder once more. A silence fell over them before Harry broke it gently.

“I talked to Hermione last night.”

In a flash, Ana lifted her head and sat straight up in his lap. “What?” she asked quickly, the surprise she felt evident on her face. Harry nodded, and Ana bit her lip. “And?” she asked nervously.

“It was...fine, actually,” he said. “Well, better than I thought it would be at least. I mean, she listened to what I had to say and everything. I told her to think about it.”

“Think about what?” Ana asked, furrowing her brows.

“About giving you another chance,” he replied simply, reaching up to brush a strand of her hair behind her ears.

“Oh,” she said, momentarily distracted by his movements. “Harry you shouldn’t worry about what she thinks of me. I just want you two to be friends again—”

“Shhh...” he said, quieting her fretful words and pulling her closer to him.

Ana closed her eyes as their lips met and it was like all the worry she’d ever felt was washed away. When they pulled apart, Harry looked at her with care-filled eyes.

“You’re too important to me for me to not worry about it, Ana. And Hermione and I will be friends again. It’ll work out in the end. Trust me,” he reassured her softly.

Ana blushed and stared at him. “I’m important to you?” she asked just as softly.

“Very,” he whispered with a smile.

Ana smiled too and felt her heart flutter slightly. She still needed to get used to that...

A yawn came from her then unexpectedly, and Harry looked at her with that same concern once more.

"Tired?" he asked her.

"A little," she said.

"You've been tired a lot lately. Have you had trouble sleeping?" he asked, rubbing circles on her back with his thumb gently.

"Oh...um...no. Not really. Guess it must be all this studying," she laughed nervously.

Ana hadn't told Harry about the dreams she'd been having every night. She refused to. Especially given the subject matter of said dreams. She knew he'd just worry about her anyways, and she didn't want him to. Besides, what was she supposed to say? That she was having dreams about killing him in the Forbidden Forest? No, it was better to just keep her nightmares to herself. No matter how horrifying they were.

"Well don't study so much then. Better yet, don't study at all. More time to spend with me," he grinned at her.

"Hmph. You wish," she laughed.

"What, am I not as important as studying?" he asked with a scoff.

"Hmmm...nearly," she said, trying not to crack up.

"Nearly?!" he cried. "Here I am telling you how much you mean to me and all I get is a nearly??" he asked in disbelief.

She couldn't hold it in any more. The laughter spilled out of her, and Harry grinned at the sight.

"You know I'm joking, right?" she asked him when her laughs had finally died away.

"I don't know. Do I?" he raised an eyebrow, smirking slightly.

"Harry, you mean more to me than anything else in this entire world," she said softly.

Harry stared at her in silence for a moment, and a small, genuine smile formed upon his lips.

“More than studying?” he asked finally, the smile never leaving his face.

Ana laughed. “Much more than studying.”

“That’s more like it,” he grinned, pulling her to him once more to steal a kiss.

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A week passed, and Hermione had had a lot of time to think about where she stood when it came to Harry and their friendship. She had heard what he had to say, and it had all made sense. But something was still holding her back...keeping her from admitting she was wrong. And the daily reminder of Voldemort’s growing strength wasn’t exactly helping the situation. That and the fact that the Carrows still had yet to be caught.

She still had hope, however. Maybe there could be a chance for her and Harry to be friends once more after all. It was all so confusing and frustrating. The conflicting emotions inside her were driving her crazy.

But it was an unfortunate Potions class one day that made the ultimate decision.

Professor Snape had finished writing down ingredients on the board and then proceeded to place them all in pairs. Hermione listened in apprehension as name after name was called. Soon there were only two people still without a partner, and Hermione had to hold back a grimace as Snape read the two names aloud.

“Hermione Granger and Ana Brighton,” he said with finality.

Immediately the students shuffled around to grab tables with their partners, but Hermione stayed where she was and thrust her hand into the air, intent on asking if she could work with someone else. She

wasn't ready to face the girl that had caused this mess in the first place.

Snape had been about to turn around to go back to his desk when he caught sight of Hermione's ever-present arm in the air. He looked down upon her distastefully.

"Ms. Granger, whatever it is you have to say can wait until after class. Right now go take a seat with your partner and begin the potion," he snipped.

"But—" she began, but stopped when he sent her one last scathing look before turning his back on her completely as he made his way to his desk.

Hermione sighed and rose from her seat, slowly making her way to where Ana was sitting near the back of the classroom. She looked almost as uncomfortable as Hermione felt as she sat down next to her.

Hermione chanced a glance across the room and spotted Harry with Goyle. Another glance showed her Ron with Malfoy. She grimaced and it crossed her mind briefly that Snape had probably had a grand old time conducting this partner list. She could just picture the Potions Master in his dark, dank office laughing with glee as he wrote down name after name...

Her thoughts were broken quite suddenly, however, when Ana's voice sounded next to her.

"Sorry about this," she said quietly. "We don't have to talk if you don't want to. We can just...make the potion and be done with it."

Hermione said nothing and rigidly began busying herself with crushing up the black beetles needed for the first part of the mixture. *Darn her for being so nice...she thought angrily. Who does she think she is?*

Ana watched Hermione angrily pound at the beetles and frowned. Maybe their being paired together was a sign. Maybe she should try

and talk to her...see if there was anything she could do to help repair the broken friendship between her and Harry. It was worth a shot...

"You know, not talking to you has been really hard for Harry ever since you had that fight," she said gently. "I mean...he never really said anything...but I could tell it was tearing him apart inside."

"Well aren't you perceptive," Hermione said biting, never taking her eyes from the beetles, which were by now nearly pulverized. She didn't know why she was acting like this...it was as though all the bitterness she'd been holding in until now had just decided to come forth.

Ana winced slightly at the tone in her voice and, dropping all pretense, she asked Hermione the question that had been eating at her ever since this whole thing had started.

"Why do you hate me so much, Hermione?"

Hermione stopped her ministrations at the unexpected question and turned in surprise to see the genuinely hurt look on Ana's face. Hermione softened immediately and sighed.

"I don't...*hate* you, Ana. That would be incredibly ignorant of me, seeing as how we've barely had a real conversation together," she said begrudgingly.

"Then why are you doing this?" Ana asked. "I won't even ask that you like me. I just...I just want to understand..." she trailed off.

Hermione stared at the girl before her in silence, and for a moment she was at a complete loss as to how to continue.

"Please," Ana said softly.

It was all Hermione needed to let her walls down, and tell Ana the truth about how she really felt. Even if the truth hurt.

"Look, Ana, you seem like a nice girl. I'm sure you *are* a nice girl. A nice, normal girl. But Harry, no matter how much he wishes for it, *isn't* normal. He never has been, and he never will be. Ever since he was

a baby, he's had the fate of the entire wizarding world riding on his shoulders.

"And you...you're a Carrows. Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing if your parents were caught, but they haven't been have they? What happens if they find you? What if Harry gets hurt because of it? Or killed even?" she asked.

Ana paled at this and was immediately reminded of her dream. A sick feeling began to form in her stomach. She couldn't have replied even if she wanted to, so she remained silent as Hermione went on.

"You don't know what he means to our world. Everyone is counting on him. The prophecy—" she halted the second the word had come out of her mouth.

Ana frowned. "Prophecy? What are you talking about? What prophecy?" she asked, finding her voice.

Hermione shook her head and waved a hand in dismissal. "It's nothing. Forget I said it," she said quickly.

It was obvious that Harry hadn't told Ana about the prophecy, and Hermione knew it must have been for a good reason, especially given how close the two of them were now. But Ana wasn't letting her get away with it that easy.

"Hermione," she said, placing a hand on the girl's arm pleadingly. "Tell me."

A bad feeling was starting to creep up on Ana, though she didn't know why. This 'prophecy', whatever it was, sounded important. And it had to do with Harry. She had to know what it was...

Hermione looked back into Ana's eyes as they sat there among the quiet chatter of students preparing their potions in the classroom and knew she had a decision to make. She could hold out and refuse to say anything more, or she could tell Ana the awful, terrible truth. Hermione struggled inwardly for a moment, but before she knew it the words were spilling out of her. The latter had won.

"There was a prophecy made before Harry was born. It...it basically implies that Harry is Voldemort's equal, and that...it's going to be between the two of them in the end. If Harry doesn't kill Voldemort, then Voldemort will kill Harry. And if that happens...then Voldemort wins," she whispered in a pained voice.

Ana stared at her in shocked disbelief as her words sunk in. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came. Her mind was working at a furious pace. It all made sense now...Harry's scar hurting, his determination, all the extra lessons he'd been taking...

He didn't just *want* to destroy Voldemort...he *had* to. He didn't have a choice in the matter. Everything rested on him...

"Now do you see why I'm acting like this?" Hermione said finally. "It's nothing against you personally Ana...it's just that Harry's important. Far too important to be taking risks. Like I said, I'm sure you're a nice girl, Ana...but don't you think it would be selfish of you to keep this thing with Harry going?"

Ana stared down to the dark, damp floor of the classroom, her shoulders slumping slightly. She felt numb...

"It's just that....besides Ron, Harry is my best friend," Hermione continued softly. "I don't want to see him get hurt or...or worse. I'm sure you feel the same way..." she trailed off.

Ana continued to stare at the floor and nodded mutely, though she was hardly aware of anything at the moment. Hermione felt a pang of guilt as she stared at her, and for a moment she wondered if she had done the right thing. She looked so...defeated.

The class went on, and Ana watched in silence as Hermione prepared most of the potion, though class work was the last thing on either of their minds at the moment. Ana was almost completely unaware of her surroundings. She was far too lost in her thoughts.

Hermione's words played over and over again in them, and the more they did, the more a crushing sense of guilt pressed upon her.

What happens if they find you? What if Harry gets hurt because of it? Or killed even?... the fate of the entire wizarding world...prophecy...Voldemort wins...far too important to be taking risks...selfish...

They echoed around her mind in quick succession, beating against her thoughts relentlessly. And in the background of it all, the image from her dream of Harry dying at her own hands played over and over.

Her heart pounded painfully against her chest, and her eyes seemed to drift of their own accord over to where Harry was seated. As if sensing her stare, he looked over and gave her a smile. Ana felt her lips move into a smile that mirrored his own, but she was almost unaware of doing it. The movement felt forced and unnatural...for there was a great struggle going on inside her at that moment. But the minute she saw his smiling face, she knew what she had to do.

Ana had made her decision.

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As the days passed, Harry grew increasingly concerned about Ana's behavior. She was just...different. Especially around him. She just seemed so distant...unreachable even. Every time he was around her she seemed to be somewhere else. He'd try to talk to her, and she'd mumble a reply or make an excuse about having to go study or something before walking off.

At first he thought nothing of it, but as time went by it only got worse. It was driving him crazy, especially since he had no idea what could have brought it on. He felt like he was slowly losing her, for some reason. The thought scared him to death. And one day, not being able to take it anymore, he decided to get to the bottom of Ana's strange behavior once and for all.

They had just walked out of their Transfiguration class and into the hallway. Students milled around them chatting idly, but Ana walked forward in silence, looking as though she was in a world of her own.

Harry walked beside her and snuck a worried glance at her downcast face.

“Good lesson, huh?” he asked, wanting to break the silence between them.

“What? Oh...um, yeah. Yeah, good lesson,” she replied monotonously.

“Hey, you wanna go visit Hagrid today? It could be fun...” he asked her, even though he knew what her response would be before she said it.

“Oh...today? Um, I can’t. I really should go—“

“Study?” he finished for her grimly.

Ana stopped walking and looked at him in surprise. But it vanished almost the instant it appeared.

“Yeah,” she said quietly, averting her eyes from his. “Well, I should get going. I’ll see you, Harry,” she said, turning to go.

But she was stopped when Harry caught her arm. She turned to face him reluctantly as he held her stare determinedly. He was going to find out what the hell was going on.

“Ana, what is it with you lately? Did I do something wrong?” he asked, trying to keep the frustration he felt out of his voice.

Ana looked up at him and slowly felt her resolve crumble. “No. No, Harry, you haven’t done anything—“

“Then what is it?” he interrupted, not even bothering to hide the frustration this time. “Why are you being so distant? Why do you pull away every time I try to touch you?”

As if to test this theory Harry reached out a hand to her arm, but she backed away at the last second, leaving Harry grasping at the air. A hurt expression crossed his features as a pained one filled Ana’s averted eyes.

This was it. She couldn't put it off any longer. She had to tell him now before she lost the nerve completely. Before she let her heart convince her that this was a mistake.

"Harry..." she began, her voice cracking with emotion already.

Get a hold of yourself, she berated herself inwardly. *Don't let him see you like this.*

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for the words she was about to say. The words that would push him...her heart...away forever.

"I can't...we can't do this anymore," she whispered, keeping her eyes determinedly on the floor instead of his eyes. She couldn't look into them right now. They would be her downfall.

"Do what anymore?" he frowned, refusing to believe that her statement could only mean one thing. The one thing he couldn't imagine happening.

She sighed. "This," she said, motioning the both of them with her hand. "Us. You and me. I...I'm s-sorry..." she trailed off, wanting to kick herself for the unsteadiness of her voice. That and the fact that the tears had already started to fill her eyes...

Harry stared at her for a moment. No. No, that couldn't be what she was saying. He wouldn't believe it. Something had to be wrong.

"Ana, what is it? What happened?" he asked, the concern he felt for her evident in each syllable.

"Nothing happened," she said, perhaps a bit too firmly.

She regretted it almost immediately. Something *had* happened. But she was determined not to tell him that. Not unless she had to. She sighed and closed her eyes. Why couldn't this be easy?

"Then what? Why are you acting like this?" he asked, the frustration creeping back in.

"I can't see you anymore Harry. We can't...we just can't, all right?" she said exasperated.

"You honestly think I'm going to just accept that answer? Ana what the hell is going on? What do you mean you can't see me anymore?" He was angry now. Angry and tired of dancing around the issue with her.

Ana lifted her eyes to finally meet his, and she knew he wasn't going to let her get away with not giving him the truth. She'd never seen him look so frustrated. Frustrated and hurt.

"Harry I...I know," she said quietly. Her throat closed up for a second before she could continue.

"You know? Know what?" he asked, furrowing his brows at her in confusion.

She swallowed and tried again. "I know about...about the prophecy," she whispered, lowering her eyes yet again.

Harry paled slightly at these words. "You...but how?" he asked numbly. "Who..." he trailed off when realization struck him. "Hermione," he whispered simply. And suddenly everything was beginning to make sense. She was pushing him away...

A pained look crossed Ana's face.

"Look, it doesn't matter who told me. The only thing that matters now is that I know. Now do you understand why we can't be together, Harry? I could...I could get you killed and then...then what?" she choked out, the horrific images of a dead Harry flashing before her eyes once more. She shut them and willed the memory of her dream from her mind.

Harry broke from his trance and set his jaw as he stared back at her. "Ana, that doesn't make any sense. How are you going to get me killed? Are you listening to yourself?" he asked angrily with a shake of his head. "I should be the one pushing you away..." he mumbled as an afterthought. "I'm the one with the most evil wizard in the world after me, not you..."

“Then why don’t you?” she asked, setting her jaw now too.

He turned to her and the words came spilling out of his mouth quickly and angrily. “Because I I—” he stopped almost as quickly as he had begun.

He looked slightly shocked for a second. He’d almost been about to say something crazy...something that couldn’t be true. He gathered his thoughts and started again, pushing his original intention to the back of his mind. There was no way he could...feel *that* anyway...was there? He took a deep breath and continued once more.

“Because...I care about you,” he said softly. “Because I know that it wouldn’t do any good either way. Because I’m a selfish prat who doesn’t give a damn about the consequences,” he finished firmly.

“But I do,” Ana replied in frustration. “I give a damn Harry. I’m not going to be the reason for your destruction. I’m not going to be your weakness. I’m not going to get you killed. You’re ‘The Boy Who Lived’ for Merlin’s sake,” she said in a rush, throwing up her hands and shaking her head.

Harry’s mouth formed a hard line. “Really? Thought I was ‘just Harry’. Or was that a lie too? Maybe you’re better at those than you claim to be.”

Ana’s face fell as she stared at him in shock. She felt the tears well up in her eyes, and before she knew what she was doing, she had slapped him. Harry turned his head to the side, but seemed to be otherwise unaffected by the blow. Several people in the hall had stopped their conversations to stare at the couple with shocked looks on their faces.

Ana looked at him and felt the tears finally escape and cascade down her face. He stared back, trying to seem indifferent. She sniffed and gave him one last pained look.

“You’re right about one thing Harry. You are a selfish prat,” she choked out. She swallowed and it took every ounce of strength she had in her to say her next words.

“Goodbye, Harry.”

And with that she walked away from him into the crowded hallway, feeling lower and in more despair than she had ever felt in her entire life. Harry watched her go in stunned silence. Watched as each step she took pushed her farther away from him. Watched as the distance between them grew, and grew, and grew. And all he could do was stand there, his heart breaking into a million pieces as she disappeared around a corner.

It was over.

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AN: Holy cow, another monster of a chapter. I swear, I think I'm physically incapable of making them short any more. I hope it's not too long for you. :) Sorry again for the wait on this one. I have finals this week and tons of papers to write, so that's why it took me a while. At least it felt like a while to me...hmmm...

Anyway, I really hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I want to thank the following people again for reviewing my last one: StarPhantom, Skiff-the-Thief, tospin320, Reader, Geminians, Sword.of.Angel, mr. goodgood, LettaR999, blueclouds96, Kazama Naruto, and The Lost Tear. Sorry if I missed anyone! As always, I really, really appreciate reviews, so please leave me one if you're willing to take the time! It means a lot to me. Thanks again to all my readers. You guys rock.

Oh, and on a sidenote, thought I should mention that Cho is a little OOC. I'm aware of this, but it's necessary for the purposes of my story. Hope that doesn't bother you guys too much.

Oh, and another thing! I just wrote and posted a oneshot called “Don't Call Me That.” If you like Lily/James, you should check it out. It's just a short, sweet, little fluffy piece I did cause I couldn't get the idea out of my head. Okay, shameless self-promotion over. Lol.

Thanks again guys! Have a great day!

Chapter 18

Hermione sighed for what felt like the hundredth time since she had sat down in her usual spot in the library and pinched the bridge of her nose. She felt a headache coming on and knew it wasn't entirely due to the mountain of books and parchment in front of her.

The memory of the conversation she had had with Ana refused to stop nagging at her, and it brought with it a tinge of regret. Perhaps it had been a bad idea to tell Ana about the prophecy...the look on the girl's face when she had heard it made Hermione cringe even now. Stricken was a good word to describe it. Completely and utterly stricken.

But Ana had told her she just wanted to understand. She'd *asked* for it...right? But that didn't relieve the guilt Hermione was beginning to feel at all. And that feeling of guilt was just about to skyrocket, though Hermione didn't know it yet.

She had just picked up her quill to start her Arithmancy essay when it happened. The double entrance doors to the library flew open with terrifying force, slamming against the walls with a loud bang and scaring the wits out of Hermione and everyone else in the room as well. She stared wide-eyed as the person who had caused this to happen came into view.

It was Harry.

But it was Harry as she had never seen him before. He looked unbelievably and unmistakably furious. It was only when he caught her eye that she realized she was the cause of this fury. That and the fact that he immediately began to approach her with angry strides, ignoring the shocked stares of the other students and the absolutely appalled look on Madam Pince's face.

"How could you?!" he yelled when he reached her table. "How *could* you, Hermione?"

Hermione stared up at him agape. "Harry, what—"

"I can't believe you would do this! What were you thinking?" he interrupted forcefully.

"Harry, I have no idea what you're talking about. Calm down," she said, still shocked by his behavior. But this seemed only to deepen Harry's anger.

"Calm down? *Calm down?!'*" he yelled again, disbelief written all over his features.

"MR. POTTER!"

Hermione turned her head at the screech and saw that Madam Pince had finally overcome her speechlessness at the violent intrusion to her library. The woman looked absolutely irate as she strode towards them.

"She broke it off with me, Hermione," Harry said quietly but firmly, ignoring the approaching librarian.

Hermione mouth fell open slightly at these words. "What?" she breathed, though she knew immediately what he was implying. Ana had pushed him away. His behavior made sense now...

"Mr. Potter, how *dare* you come bursting in here like some...some...animal! The audacity...I can not believe you would show such utter disrespect for my library!!" Madam Pince sputtered when she reached him. "Never in all my years here..."

She droned on but Harry still held Hermione's gaze and ignored her. Hermione was frozen in place, letting his words sink in. When it was clear that Madam Pince wouldn't stop her tirade any time soon, Harry sighed in frustration.

"Can we go somewhere and talk about this?" he asked Hermione quietly, but with a distinct edge to his voice.

She felt numb as she slowly nodded her head. There was no use trying to delay the inevitable.

“Madam Pince, please accept my profuse apologies. I meant no disrespect. It won’t happen again,” Harry said as he turned to the librarian.

She halted her objections quickly at the genuine tone in his voice and looked as though she had not been expecting such a statement from him. The woman opened and closed her mouth a few times, vaguely resembling a fish out of water, but before she could respond, Harry had begun to walk out of the room with Hermione close at his heels.

Madam Pince straightened her robes and, collecting herself, resumed her seat behind her desk as though nothing had happened. The library was deathly silent once more, after all, just the way she liked it. Even if the remaining students weren’t still too shocked by what had just happened to speak they wouldn’t have for fear that Pince’s fury would be rained down upon them as well. She really was quite frightening when one got right down to it...

Meanwhile, back in the hallway, Hermione tried her best to keep up with Harry’s long strides. She hugged her books to her chest and realized quite suddenly the death grip she had on them, loosening it as best she could. As they walked, she tried to process just what Harry had told her.

Ana had broken up with Harry. And from the way Harry was acting, he must’ve figured out that she had told Ana about the prophecy. It was the only logical explanation for his behavior. But Hermione never expected anything like this to happen...

She watched as Harry made a beeline for the first door he saw, grabbing it and holding it open, waiting for Hermione to go in ahead of him. She entered the room reluctantly and looked around. It appeared to be an old classroom. White sheets covered desks and tables, and sunlight poured in from two windows overlooking the grounds.

Harry closed the door and immediately began pacing in front of her, keeping his eye on the dusty floor below. His posture was rigid and tense, and Hermione shifted slightly in the uncomfortable silence that ensued.

Finally he stopped in front of one of the windows and stared blankly out across the grounds, his back to her.

“Why did you do it, Hermione?” he asked softly, a hint of sadness creeping into his voice. “Why did you tell her?”

Hermione closed her eyes briefly and then cast them downwards to where she wrung her hands together nervously.

“I...” she began hesitantly before swallowing and starting again, more surely this time. “She wanted to know, Harry. She had a right to know...she asked me to tell her...*pleaded* with me—“

“It wasn’t yours to tell!” he yelled as he turned around abruptly.

His eyes flashed once again with anger, and Hermione had to do all she could not to take a step back.

“I don’t care if she got down on her *knees* and begged you, you had absolutely no right to tell her about it!” he said firmly. “None,” he finished, softer this time, but never losing the edge.

Hermione looked away shamefully as his words cut her like a knife. He was right, she knew.

“Harry...I...I’m sor—“

“You wanted this to happen, didn’t you?” he cut her off.

“What? Harry, no!” she said quickly, but Harry didn’t appear to be listening.

“You wanted her to leave me. You knew she felt guilty about our fighting to begin with and you pushed it one step further, didn’t you? You knew she’d think pushing me away was the right thing to do, didn’t you?” he asked, growing angrier with each word.

Hermione looked horrorstruck. “Harry...please! That’s not true! I never...I never thought she’d actually push you away! Please, Harry...”

“Then why did you do it?! Why?” he asked, taking a step forward. Hermione could almost feel the wrath emanating from him. He looked at her expectantly and crossed his arms against his chest, his face hard and cold.

“I...I don’t know,” she squeaked. “It just...sort of came out...I guess...”

“It just came out??” he blurted incredulously. “My deepest secret ‘just came out?’” he repeated in disbelief, looking like he was ready to explode again.

Hermione sighed and tried to gather her thoughts, which was increasingly difficult with Harry’s hard glare on her.

“Look, Harry, I didn’t plan this or anything, if that’s what you’re thinking. It’s just, we got paired together in Potions, and I wasn’t exactly ready to face her yet as it was, and I was still thinking about what you had said to me in the hallway that night and...I just...I don’t know, all the frustration I had been building up came out and one thing led to another,” she said, looking defeated. “I’m sorry Harry. I know I shouldn’t have said anything—”

“You’re damn right you shouldn’t have,” he interrupted forcefully.

Hermione sighed. “I was just trying to protect you Harry—”

“I don’t need your bloody protection Hermione!” he yelled again, so harshly that it made her wince.

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists and shook his head before turning to stare out the window once more. A thick silence fell over the both of them before he broke it softly.

“You know, when you and Ron got together I was scared. Scared of what it might mean for our friendship. Scared that if anything happened between the two of you, it would affect all of us,” he said, pausing for a moment as his eyes continued to stare unseeingly out over the vast expanse of land outside the castle.

"But then I saw how happy he made you and vice versa. I saw the way you looked at each other. The warmth in your eyes...the love. And I let go of that fear, because I knew you were meant for each other. Knew that it would be selfish of me to object to it. And I knew that no matter what happened...we'd always be friends," he said quietly.

Hermione felt the tears begin to form in her eyes at his words and didn't even bother trying to blink them away. Harry turned around to face her again, his green eyes boring into her own, and for the first time Hermione saw the true pain that lay in them.

"I'm happy for you both...you know that," he went on. "I just thought that maybe you'd want me to have that too. And I did..." he trailed off and lowered his head, looking as though he was trying to collect himself.

Hermione felt another, sharper pang of guilt at the wounded look on his face. She stepped towards him hesitantly, though she didn't know what it was she was trying to do. Perhaps she felt she needed to comfort him in some way...but Harry looked beyond help. He looked...well...heartbroken. He looked heartbroken.

"I was happy Hermione," he said when he had composed himself. "Me," he laughed humorlessly. "The angsty boy wonder." Harry smirked and shook his head. It faded quickly, however, and his face became stoic once more.

"Now...now I'm right back where I started," he frowned. A silence fell before he affected an indifferent stance.

"I suppose congratulations are in order," he said. "You got what you wanted Hermione. Am I safe now? Do you suppose I've thwarted a premature death? It's for the greater good, right?" he asked dully.

Hermione felt another stab and looked at him with a pained expression. "Harry—"

But Harry didn't appear to be listening. He walked past her towards the door and paused with his hand on the doorknob.

“You said I was being selfish for not pushing her away. But did you ever think that maybe it isn’t me who’s selfish?” he asked, pausing. “Maybe it’s you,” he said finally, giving her one last expressionless look before walking out the door.

"Harry!" she called out in a feeble attempt to get him to stay.

The tears now escaped her eyes freely, and they continued to fall long after his words had sunk in. But it was no use. Harry was gone, and she was left alone with her thoughts. Alone with her guilt. Alone with the fear that she may have just lost her best friend for good.

“What have I done...” she whispered.

[illegible]

In another part of the castle, a girl sat staring out the window with similar tears streaming down her face. They too were over Harry, though they were for a much different reason.

Ana curled her legs closer against her body, trying to make herself as small as she felt. Her dorm room was deserted. For that she was grateful. She stared unseeingly out over the grounds from her window seat as yet another tear trailed its way down her pale cheek.

Stop it.... You did this. This is what you wanted. It's for the best...

But no matter how hard she tried to convince herself that it was for the best, Ana still felt worse than she ever had in her entire life. Even when she had been with her parents...even when she had been exposed to evil in its purest form...never had she felt like this. Like there was a hole where her heart should be.

Walking away from Harry had been the hardest thing she had ever done. So hard, in fact, that she wondered if she had made the right decision.

But no, she told herself. This was the only way. Hermione had been right. It would have been selfish of her to keep her relationship with Harry going. If anything ever happened to him because of her...

She shuddered. The images from her dreams came back to her yet again despite her efforts to keep them at bay. She couldn't...*wouldn't*...let anything like that happen to Harry if she could help it. He was much too important to her...or perhaps it was the fact that he was more important *than* her...

She frowned at this thought and found herself thinking about the prophecy once more. Harry wasn't just important to her...he was important to the entire world. She mustn't forget that. She herself mattered little in the grand scheme of things, but Harry...he had to save them all.

Ana jumped slightly when Goldie hopped up into her lap unexpectedly with a soft '*mew.*' She wiped the tears away and absentmindedly stroked the small cat's soft fur, earning a purr in response.

"Why is this so hard?" she asked the cat softly. "Why can't I let him go?"

Goldie lifted her small head to stare at Ana, continuing to purr softly but giving no other response. Ana smiled sadly and once again turned her head to stare out the window. Deep down, farther than her mind dared let her go, she knew why this was so hard. She just had yet to realize it.

Maybe it'll get easier, she thought, trying to convince herself that being without Harry wasn't the end of the world. But as the days turned into weeks, she discovered how very wrong she was. It didn't get easier with time. It got much, much worse.

She saw Harry everywhere. In classes, the corridors, the common room, the Great Hall...no matter where she turned he was there. A constant reminder of what she had lost. Harry would try to catch her eye and even tried to speak to her on more than one occasion, but Ana brushed him off and ignored him each time. She couldn't let him try to convince her that she had made the wrong choice. He'd win far too easily.

Yes, it was best to ignore him...no matter how hard it was or how badly she wanted to speak to him. To stare into his gentle green eyes. To feel his lips upon her own once more...

These were dangerous thoughts she knew, but that didn't stop them from plaguing her each and every day that passed without him. She focused on them constantly, zoning out during lessons, staring blankly ahead in the corridors. Feeling numb to everything else around her. It soon got to the point where she couldn't even cry herself to sleep any more. There was no release. No way out of the hollow emptiness that slowly began to consume her.

If she had been more aware of her surroundings, she would have noticed the stares and whispers that other students gave her. News had traveled quickly yet again around Hogwarts, it seemed. She was no longer "Harry's girl."

But one stare in particular stood out from all the rest, so searing was it, the owner of which choosing to remain a simple observer until one cold February day. Ana had just walked out of her Transfiguration class, one of the last ones out as usual. She walked down the hall and was about to turn a corner when someone stepped out in front of her, effectively blocking her path.

It was Malfoy.

"Nice day isn't it?" he asked with a smirk, a piece of his white-blond hair falling into his eyes.

Ana gave him a glare and moved to walk around him, but he stepped to the side to block her path once more.

"Do you mind?" she said coldly. She was in no mood to deal with a slimy Slytherin at the moment.

Draco's smirk grew in size but otherwise ignored this. "So, I heard you broke it off with scarhead. Smart move. Finally came to your senses, eh?"

Ana stiffened visibly. "That is none of your business," she spat, trying to move past him again, but Draco was too quick. He blocked her

once more. She sighed in frustration and tried to keep from completely losing her cool.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" she asked angrily. "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

The smirk disappeared at these words and a hard, cold look replaced it. Ana suddenly felt the strongest urge to take a step back but held her ground determinedly, not wanting to show him she was feeling a stirring of unease. A thick silence fell over them both before he broke it finally.

"You're hiding something," he said softly, never taking his cold glare off of her.

Ana went rigid but kept her face expressionless. Inside she was panicking, but she couldn't let him see that. She *mustn't*. What did he know?

"I don't know what it is, but I *will* find out," he continued with a sneer, the suspicious look returning to his eyes. "Be assured of that."

Ana clenched her jaw, feeling the unease turn into a fear but said nothing as she shoved past him with resolve. He made no move to stop her this time, but kept his gaze on her until she disappeared down the hallway.

He frowned and began making his way down to the Slytherin common room, deep in thought. He had figured he might be able to scare some sort of reaction out of her, but that didn't seem to have worked. She hardly reacted at all to his words. It was upsetting. Extremely so, in fact. He had been so sure the little weakling would cower under his glare. It would have given him *something* at least...

He came upon the entrance to the common room finally and gave the password to gain entry. He strode forward and immediately headed for the couch, sinking down into it with a frustrated sigh. His mind worked at a furious pace, and he barely noticed when Pansy entered the room and took a seat next to him.

"Hey Draco," she grinned, scooting closer.

Draco barely threw her an acknowledging glance, instead opting to stare blankly ahead at the stone wall. He rubbed at his chin, his thoughts refusing to slow down for even a second. Pansy leaned in and began playing with a strand of his hair idly, trying to get him to notice her. When he continued to ignore this, seemingly off in his own little world, she leaned in closer.

"Whatcha thinking about?" she whispered in what she hoped was a sensual voice.

Draco seemed to snap out of his trance at this and leapt off the couch agitatedly, immediately falling into an angry pace.

"I *know* she looks familiar somehow. I just know it. Why? Where could I have possibly seen her before?" he mumbled, mostly to himself.

Pansy's face fell into a look of disgust and disappointment. "You aren't still thinking about that stupid Gryffindor girl are you?" she asked incredulously.

"Brighton. Her name's Brighton," he said with a hint of frustration.

"Why do you even care what her bloody name is? She doesn't even deserve your attention, mousy little thing that she is..." she spat, pouting slightly.

Draco threw an annoyed glare her way as he stopped his pacing. "There's something off about her. Something I'm missing," he said. When Pansy simply scowled at him, he shook his head. "What am I telling you for?" he asked in ill-concealed disgust before turning to head to his dorm room, mumbling to himself along the way.

Pansy clenched her jaw as she watched him go and crossed her arms in front of her angrily. Her thoughts turned to the Brighton girl and how the little cretin had taken over Draco's own thoughts these past few months. He'd become obsessed with finding out what she was hiding, if anything.

Jealousy coursed through Pansy's veins at this even though she knew Draco had no designs whatsoever about the shy little Gryffindor.

He could never stoop that low. But Pansy clenched her fists in frustration all the same.

I'll make you notice me Draco. Soon you won't even bother to spare that girl a second glance...

With these uplifting thoughts in mind, Pansy relaxed, the slightest hint of a grin gracing her lips.

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Harry watched Ana from a distance and felt his heart break a little more with each day that passed. He was worried about her. She looked tired and drained, as though she weren't getting proper sleep. She was paler and thinner than usual and more quiet and withdrawn than he had ever remembered seeing her. She kept to herself most of the time and usually seemed to be lost in her thoughts.

He'd tried speaking to her a few times, trying to apologize and tell her how silly this was, but she never let him get near enough for that. She seemed to be stubbornly holding onto this idea that she was bad for him. That she'd get him killed somehow. He'd shake his head at the thought and curse the fact that a prophecy about him was ever made for the hundredth time. It was what had caused this in the first place. And Hermione had been the one to tell Ana about it. A fact that Harry still had not forgotten.

He made this abundantly clear to Ron one day, who had come into their dorm room with a pleading sort of look on his face.

"She's really beating herself up about it Harry. I know she wants to apologize. Maybe you could...I dunno...try and talk to her?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"Talk to her?" Harry replied incredulously from where he was seated on his bed. "I've done that Ron. I was the one who tried to mend things in the first place, remember? I was the one who apologized. I even gave her time to bloody think about it, and what did she do? She went and spilled my deepest darkest secret to the one person it would affect the most," he said angrily.

Ron swallowed and shifted uncomfortably. There really wasn't anything he could say to that. Harry sighed and let his head fall into his hands as he rested his elbows on his knees.

"How did everything get so complicated?" he asked softly.

"Well it is you we're talking about," Ron said with a small grin, attempting to lighten the conversation. "When *aren't* things complicated in the life of Harry Potter?"

Harry smirked and couldn't help but give a short laugh. "Yeah, I guess you're right," he said, trying to smile but failing rather horribly at it.

Ron's own grin faded slightly as he stared at his completely miserable best friend and something occurred to him quite suddenly.

"Bugger all...you're in love with her, aren't you?" he said in shocked disbelief.

Harry's head shot up at this and his mouth fell open slightly. He tried to work his mouth but no words came. Instead, he averted his eyes from his friend's and lifted himself off the bed to move towards the door. Ron watched, still looking shocked by this discovery.

"Harry, you have to tell her!" he said quickly before Harry reached the door. "Talk to her...make her listen. She feels the same way, I'm sure of it! The both of you have been moping around miserably these past few weeks. Just tell her how you feel, mate," he said firmly.

Harry hesitated near the doorway for a moment, still refusing to look at Ron. He seemed to be having an inner struggle.

"Listen, I was scared too about telling Hermione how I felt about her," Ron went on. "I don't even want to think about what would have happened if I hadn't told her how much she meant to me. Harry, you'll never forgive yourself if you don't tell Ana the same thing..." he trailed off assuredly.

Harry stared blankly ahead, his body rigid. "I don't know what you're talking about, Ron," he said quietly but firmly. "I'm going to go riding now," he added curtly before walking out of the room.

Ron's face fell as he watched his best friend disappear, and he ran a tired hand over his face.

*Bloody stubborn git....*he thought agitatedly.

With a sigh he too exited the room, off to go see if he could find Hermione. She had taken to studying outside recently, seeing as how she was far too embarrassed to show her face in the library ever since that incident with Harry. Ron made his way down the castle and out into the courtyard where he immediately spotted her sitting on a nearby bench, book in hand. He smiled slightly and pulled his robes around him a little tighter as he neared her. There was still a bit of a chill in the air.

"Hey," he said softly as he sat down next to her. She lifted her head and smiled warmly at him, placing her book to the side. Ron reached out for her hand with his own, which she took gladly, giving it a gentle squeeze as she laid her head on his shoulder. He swallowed and tried to figure out how he was going to tell her about his disastrous talk with Harry.

"Hermione—"

"He's still upset, isn't he?" she interrupted him quietly.

Ron turned to look at her in surprise. "How'd you know?" he asked.

Hermione sighed and lifted her head to meet his eyes. "Ron, what I did was terrible. I wouldn't blame him if he never spoke to me again. How could I have been so stupid?" she groaned, hiding her face in her hands with a pained expression.

"You aren't stupid," Ron said gently.

Hermione just lowered her hands and frowned sadly. "You should have seen his face, Ron. After he was done yelling and screaming. He looked so...undone. Like nothing mattered anymore. And I knew

that I was the reason he felt that way. I've never felt so horrible in my entire life..." she said, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

Ron said nothing, just wrapped his arms around her and let her speak, knowing she needed to get it out.

"I just...I thought I was doing the right thing, you know? I mean, she's a Carrows for Merlin's sake!" she said in frustration. "I was just...trying to protect him. I thought if she pushed him away, he'd be better off. But I was wrong. He's worse now than he was before...Sure he might be safer, but he's hurt. I hurt him Ron. I hurt my best friend."

The tears now streamed out of her eyes, and she buried her head into his shoulder, sinking deeper into his comforting embrace.

“Everything just spun out of control. I never meant for this to happen,” she whispered in a strained, small voice.

Ron tightened his hold on her and gently rocked her back and forth as she cried. "Shhh....it's okay. I know you didn't. Everything is gonna be fine, Hermione," he soothed, murmuring more words of comfort over and over again as they sat there.

They stayed that way for a long time afterwards, neither of them noticing the figure hidden in shadow behind one of the nearby pillars. The Slytherin girl smirked and felt a surge of triumph as she thought over what she had just overheard.

So she's a Carrows? That's what she's been hiding...

“Perfect,” she whispered with a grin as a plan began to form in her cunning mind. If Draco didn’t notice her after this, he never would. But she wasn’t worried. The stupid Gryffindor girl had a secret she was hiding after all. A big, juicy, delectable secret.

This is gonna be good...

[illegible]

Ana awoke from yet another of her nightmares the next morning in a cold sweat. She sat up slowly and wiped her brow, willing her heart to slow down as she did almost every morning.

A crash of thunder sounded abruptly, making her head snap towards the window. She rose from her bed and walked to it to find that it was pouring out. The rolling clouds were a dark gray, and the rain spattered against the glass in a soothing sort of cadence.

She sighed and took one last look at the gloomy grounds before turning to go get ready for the day. She spoke to no one as she made her way down through the castle towards the Great Hall. It was breakfast, and as Ana walked into the room she noted that there were quite a few students there already, chatting idly at the different tables.

Her eyes swept over to the Gryffindor table, and she stiffened slightly when she saw Harry already sitting there in his usual spot. He glanced up as if sensing her gaze, and Ana immediately turned her head away. She moved to grab a seat at the very end of the table when a voice cut her short.

“Oh Ana!”

Ana halted and turned, confused, to where the high voice had sounded from. To her surprise, she saw that it had been Pansy Parkinson, the Slytherin girl she always saw hanging around Malfoy. Pansy had stood up from her seat and was smirking at her with a strange, giddy sort of look on her face. Malfoy himself sat near her, but he seemed just as surprised as Ana was that Pansy was calling out to her. Several students looked up from their plates at the interruption (Harry included), and when Pansy was certain she had Ana’s attention she went on.

“Where are you going?” she asked with the same knowing little smirk on her face. “Don’t you think you’d fit in better over here at the Slytherin table? You are a Carrows after all...”

Time stopped.

She couldn’t breathe. All Ana could do was stand in complete and utter shock as the Great Hall erupted into a sea of appalled looks and

a chorus hushed whispers. This was one of her nightmares....It had to be. But as Ana continued to stand there amidst the gasps and disbelieving looks around her, she realized this was no dream. This was real.

Pansy smiled triumphantly at Ana as she slowly sat back down. Ana felt the searing gazes of the rest of the students upon her and felt like she was going to be sick. She couldn't breathe...

Her eyes met Harry's once more and as the first tear slid down her cheek, she turned and ran out of the Hall. He was up in an instant, running after her departing form and not caring who saw the concern he felt for her written all over his face.

She shoved open the oak entrance doors to the castle and ran out into the cold, stinging rain. But Ana felt nothing. Nothing except the hot tears that slid down her face and the clenching despair that gripped her heart.

"Ana!!"

Harry's voice rang through the cold, wet air, and she stopped at the sound, breathing fast. She didn't turn around. Just stared ahead blankly. Nothing mattered anymore...

Harry halted mere feet from her. The rain had them both drenched in seconds. His hair clung to his forehead and drops of water fell from it to the grass below, but he ignored this. All he could see was Ana...

"Ana..." he said again, softer this time. A roll of thunder sounded overhead ominously, but the two couldn't have been more unaware of their surroundings.

"What do you want, Harry?" she asked dully, not bothering to turn around to face him. The rain was freezing as it pelted and stung her skin. Funny how she didn't feel cold at all...she didn't really feel anything...

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but no words came. What was he supposed to say?

They both remained silent for a few moments after that, the only sound being the occasional roll of thunder and the rain that fell unceasingly upon them both. Harry watched as Ana's shoulders drooped slightly and wished he could see her face. Wished he could rush up to her and take her in his arms...

"Everyone knows now," Ana said finally in a defeated way. "Everyone knows the truth about me. I guess I won't have to lie anymore. And just when I was getting good at it too..." she trailed off with a humorless smile, which faded almost as soon as it appeared.

"Life is a funny thing, isn't it Harry?" she said numbly.

Harry felt a pang in his heart at these words and suddenly he found his voice once more. "Ana, it's going to be okay. We'll get through this—"

"We?" she asked sharply, finally spinning around to face him. "There is no 'we' Harry. Not anymore. I'm a Carrows, remember? My parents are followers of a powerful wizard who wants to kill you, for Merlin's sake!" she said loudly, taking a deep breath before continuing. "Besides, what would everyone think? Harry Potter, savior of the wizarding world, dating the daughter of wanted Death Eaters. What would people say to that?" she choked out in frustration.

"I don't give a damn about what people will say, Ana! You think that's important to me?" Harry asked angrily. Ana said nothing to this, just continued to stare at him in a tense sort of silence. Harry clenched his jaw as he held her gaze and shook his head slightly after a moment.

"You know," he went on, softer this time. "I've been Harry bloody Potter my whole life. I've gotten use to the stares, and whispers, and fake friendliness, and everything that came with it. I was just fine being alone. And then I met you. And I realized that I had never been fine. Not even close," he said quietly, a pained expression crossing his face.

"I can't do this anymore, Ana," he continued, taking a step closer to her. "I can't watch you from afar and not be able to touch you. I can't just stand by and do nothing as I see you slowly start to fade away. I

can't pretend like every second I don't spend with you isn't killing me inside. I *can't* Ana..."

Ana felt his words pierce her heart as she stared into his sincere, caring eyes. The eyes that belonged to the boy that was never far from her thoughts. She suddenly felt a surge of emotion stronger than she had ever felt before, and all of the anger and frustration over the situation came pouring out of her before she could stop to think about it.

"Why?" she sobbed angrily, letting the tears flow freely now as the words spilled out of her in quick succession. "Why can't you Harry? Why can't you just let me go? Why does this have to be so hard? Why, huh? Why—"

"BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!"

Ana's breath stopped as she sucked in a gasp at his words. Harry's chest heaved in and out, and he stared at her with an intensity that almost made her take a step back. Another roll of thunder broke through the air, and the rain came down harder than ever. Water clung to Ana's eyelashes and she blinked to rid them of the blurriness, unaware that it was her tears she blinked away, not the rain.

"What did you say?" she whispered in shock, not willing to believe that she had really heard what she thought she had.

Harry stepped closer still and swallowed. Ron's words in their dorm room came back to him briefly, and Harry suddenly saw that his friend had been right. He could hardly believe it took him this long to realize it.

"I said...I love you." He closed the space between them slowly and reached up a tentative hand to cup her cheek. "I'm in love with you Ana."

Ana found it hard to breathe. Her mouth hung open slightly as she stared up into his green eyes.

"No one's ever said that to me before..." she whispered finally, in somewhat of a daze.

thoughts about the little piece of information he had just acquired. Well, perhaps 'little' was a bit of an understatement...

How could he have been so stupid? Why didn't he see it before? Her eyes, her nose, her mouth...so like the features of her parents. The parents who were currently hiding out at his family's mansion. The parents he had met briefly that summer day which now seemed so long ago. The ones who were searching for their missing daughter...

She's a Carrows.

He gave a short, disbelieving laugh at how fortunate this revelation was. He could hardly believe his luck, as a matter of fact. It was as though everything had fallen into place in the most rewarding of ways.

Wait till Father hears about this... he thought with a smirk. If this didn't earn him respect in his father's eyes, nothing would. But how could it not?

With this assurance, he smirked again and discretely rose from the table, ignoring Pansy's desperate attempts to catch his eye as he walked out of the Hall.

He had a letter to write.

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AN: Here it is! Finally...haha. Sorry for the wait. The holidays were keeping me busy. By the way, I hope all of you had nice ones! I know this chapter is a little shorter than my last couple of ones have been, but I'm hoping the content made up for its lack of ridiculous length...lol. Anyways, I have a couple of people to thank as usual for reviewing last time: InAshenSilence, Harry Potter and CO. Lover, Reader, Skraku, NuvaChaos, Amber, marauderettes4656, monde, RBlack, friendlfangirl, Inziladun, darthme1011, actress19, emoscreamo, My personal façade, Sword.of.Angel, Stygius.Magic, blueclouds96, LettaR999, Star-a-licious. You guys rock! Thank you so much for taking the time to leave your comments. I really appreciate them a whole lot. :)

Anyways, thanks to everyone for reading and let me know what you think of this one. I hope you all have a great day and a Happy New Year. Thanks everyone!

Chapter 19

I love you.

Ever since she had heard those words spoken to her, Ana couldn't get them out of her head. It was almost impossible to believe that someone...Harry...loved her. That she loved him. Did she even know what love was?

Yes, she realized. It was what she felt when she looked at Harry. When he was near her, or when she thought about him...or when she kissed him. That was love. Nothing else could be quite as powerful. Quite as pure.

She loved him. And that was that.

But there were other, less wonderful, things that occupied her thoughts as well. It was hard for them not to, in fact...

Yes, Harry loved her, but the entire school now knew who she really was. It didn't matter that not every student was in the Great Hall when Pansy Parkinson made it known that Ana was actually a Carrows. Word traveled fast at Hogwarts. Alarmingly so. And if it weren't for Harry, Ana would almost certainly have buckled under the stares and whispers that followed her wherever she went.

They weren't like the curious ones that had surrounded her when she first came to Hogwarts. They weren't even like the ones that had plagued her right after she had broken it off with Harry. No, these stares were far more difficult to ignore.

Upon learning that Ana's secret had been revealed, Professor Dumbledore had acted quickly and efficiently to get things under control. He'd asked the Heads of Houses to say a few words about it to their respective students, explaining the situation without giving away too many details. Basically this included a lecture about how Dumbledore was well aware of the fact that Ana was a Carrows and that the reason why it had been kept a secret was for her own safety as the well-known Death Eaters had yet to be caught.

It was a risky move doing this, but Dumbledore had told Ana that he really had no other choice. All he could do was assure her that she was still perfectly safe at Hogwarts (extra precaution would now be taken, of course), and that she'd just have to get by as best she could with everyone knowing.

This was easier said than done, it turned out.

Even after the students had had the situation explained to them, their stares and whispers refused to stop completely. It seemed even the Gryffindors themselves chose to remain wary of their fellow Housemate. Ana, it appeared, was an outcast in every sense of the word.

But at least she had Harry. Yes, at least she had him...

"Ana?"

She was pulled abruptly from her thoughts as the sound of his voice invaded her consciousness. He gave her a small grin when she turned to meet his eyes from where she sat beside him underneath their tree by the lake.

"You left me again," he said gently, the hint of a grin never leaving his face.

"No," Ana said, smiling a bit now too. "No, I'd never leave you."

Harry raised his eyebrows at this, and she laughed slightly as she turned her head back to the lake.

"Not again, anyway," she said with a wry grin. "I was just thinking about stuff, that's all."

Harry's grin faded slightly. He knew what had been going through her mind. Wasn't that difficult to deduce really...the incident in the Great Hall had only happened a few days ago.

"Hey," he said, reaching up gently and turning her head towards him once more. "I said we'd get through this. I wasn't lying..."

Ana looked up into his sincere eyes and couldn't help but smile a little. "Yeah I know. I don't know how I would get through this if it weren't for you. You're practically the only person who doesn't glare at me or avoid me like the plague every time they see me. It's like they think I'll throw a curse at them or something..." she trailed off dolefully.

Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. As someone who knew what it felt like to have the whole school turn against him, he could sympathize with how she was feeling at the moment.

"You are not your parents, Ana. You aren't like them. And the only thing that matters is that you know that. Trust me, I've been in your shoes before and I know how awful it is, but it *will* get better. Everyone will realize they're wrong about you..." he said assuredly. "And even if they don't, you'll always have me."

Ana smiled at his words and couldn't help but feel her spirits lighten, if only slightly. "How do you always know exactly what to say to make me feel better?" she asked, a hint of wonder and amusement in her voice.

Harry gave a smirk and Ana waited for the cheeky comment that would almost certainly come from him, but was surprised at what he said instead.

"I love you. That's how."

The words were spoken simply and easily, and Harry looked at her in that way he'd been doing ever since that day in the rain. Like he could hardly believe she was sitting there before him. Like he suspected this to be a dream and nothing more. Like he was the luckiest guy in the world.

"I love you too," she whispered. It still seemed surreal to speak those words aloud. But it was the truth. She did love him.

He smiled slowly and leaned down to place a soft kiss on her lips. He smiled again when she blushed slightly and tore his eyes off of her to study the lake in front of them, a frown marring his face as a thought occurred to him.

“Still can’t believe Pansy didn’t get in trouble at all for what she did, though” he said angrily.

Ana frowned too and looked down as she played with a blade of grass. “I know...but you heard what Dumbledore said. There isn’t anything he can really do about it. She didn’t break any rules. And I don’t blame him for not being too concerned about it. You’ve seen how busy he is lately. He’s had to pull a lot of favors to keep my identity from getting outside the school walls, not to mention he’s still occupied with heading the Order. I owe everything to him...” she said genuinely.

Harry sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he said, still looking a little miffed. “Wonder how she found out, though...” he trailed off, furrowing his brows.

Ana bit her lip as she thought. This had been troubling her as well.

“To be honest, I’m surprised it was Pansy,” she said after a while, still looking lost in thought. “I thought for sure it would be Malfoy if anyone...”

“Malfoy?” Harry asked, turning to her in confusion. “Why him?”

Ana seemed to come out of her daze at this. She looked at him and shifted uncomfortably before returning her eyes to the blade of grass in her hands, which was now nervously being ripped to pieces.

“Oh...um...I dunno. After that incident in the hall I just figured he’d be the one to find out about me first...” she trailed off with a shrug, looking sorry she had brought it up.

“Incident?” Harry asked, turning his full attention on her now. “What incident?”

“Erm...it was nothing, really. He just tried to scare me, is all. He cornered me and said something about knowing I was hiding something, though he didn’t seem to know what he was talking about so I thought nothing of it,” she said hesitantly.

Harry, however, looked furious. "What? Why didn't you tell me about this? Where was I?" he asked quickly.

Ana tore her eyes from him and looked down once more. "It...it happened when we...when we weren't...well, you know," she said softly.

The anger left Harry's eyes immediately to be replaced with something that very much resembled regret. There was a thick silence before he spoke again quietly.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there, Ana. I should have been—"

"Harry, stop," she interrupted him quickly. "I'm the one who left you, remember? It was my fault, not yours..."

Harry looked at her sadly and reached up a hand to her face. "I still should have been there," he said softly. "I never should have let you walk away from me."

Ana felt her heart warm at the caring look in his eyes and wondered once more what she had ever done to deserve someone like him.

"I don't know how I managed to get by without you all those weeks," she said finally, leaning her head upon his shoulder with a sigh. Harry pulled her close and rested his chin atop her head gently.

"You'll never have to worry about that again, love. There's no way I'm making the same mistake twice," he said assuredly. "Sorry to say it, but you're stuck with me. Depressing, I know..." he trailed off, the hint of a grin in his voice.

Ana laughed and swatted at his chest playfully. "Shut up. Such a git..."

Harry laughed too at this before suggesting they head back up to the castle. The sun was starting to set and they had classes in the morning. She agreed and he helped her up before they started making their way up to the common room. They entered the portrait hole and were immediately met with the sound of people chatting and laughing. Students were everywhere, most of which with books open

trying to study for the end of year exams. The second Harry and Ana became visible, however, a hush fell over the room as everyone stopped what they were doing to stare.

Harry stiffened, looking angry, and Ana shifted nervously, looking as though she wanted to run out of the room. A few whispers sounded here and there, and most eyes were trained on Ana suspiciously.

“What are you all looking at?” Harry said finally as his eyes flashed angrily at his fellow housemates. “Whatever happened to sticking up for your friends? To House unity and brotherhood? I’d expect this from people like the Slytherins but we’re all in Gryffindor for Merlin’s sake. You never had a problem with her before! Now all of a sudden she has a different last name and you hate her? Tell me how that makes a lick of sense!” he asked loudly, letting his temper flare.

“Harry, stop, it’s okay...” Ana said softly, placing her hand on his arm and trying to tug him forward gently. She felt her cheeks start to burn as the whole room’s attention continued to be focused on her. Some students looked a bit guilty at Harry’s words, but others still looked on warily.

“No,” Harry said angrily. “I won’t stop until they do. You’re all acting like a bunch of fools,” he seethed, turning his head to look around at everyone once more.

“Us?” a voice called out incredulously from a corner of the room.

The owner stood up from his chair and Harry saw that it was Cormac McLaggen, a large seventh year known for his arrogance.

“I think it’s you who’s the fool, Harry. She’s a bloody Carrows! I always knew you were a bit dodgy, but you must be off your bloody rocker to be hanging around someone like her,” he said with a scoff.

Harry saw red and would have beaten McLaggen to a bloody pulp if a sharp voice hadn’t cut his steps short.

“I suggest you sit down McLaggen, before I give you a detention for disorderly conduct!”

Harry and Ana turned their heads to be met with the surprising sight of a very calm looking Hermione. She stood in the entrance to the common room with a determined and authoritative air, never taking her eyes off the large and now very affronted looking seventh year. McLaggen huffed but sat down obediently, sending one last glare at Harry. Hermione turned her attention to the rest of the students now, who all stared at her somewhat fearfully.

“Well?” she said finally, raising her eyebrows. “What are you all staring at? What Harry said was right. We’re a team. We need to stick up for our own. I for one feel that our class work and exams might be just a tad more important than a last name anyways. Let’s just face that we’ve all acted rashly and been too quick in our judgments. I include myself in that as well.” She said this last sentence softly, a tinge of regret audible in her voice.

More than a few students looked guilty now at this reprimand from the ever-logical Hermione Granger. Harry and Ana both stared at her mutely, looking a bit shocked at her unexpected words. What was also unexpected was the sincerity with which she spoke. Hermione was silent a moment before breaking from her trance.

“Get back to work now. Exams are only a few weeks away,” she said in that famous bossy tone of hers. People seemed more than willing to follow orders if it meant being rid of the awkwardness of the moment, and soon the flipping of pages and soft chatter was heard once again.

Harry stared at Hermione for a moment, looking as though he was unsure of how to react to this. She shot him the briefest of glances before averting her eyes and turning to go out the portrait hole once more. He watched her leave with a frown and turned to Ana slowly, still looking at the place where Hermione had stood in confusion.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go up to my room.”

Ana didn’t argue with this, as standing in the common room still felt a little uncomfortable even after what Hermione had said to everyone. She followed him up the stairs and they entered his dorm, both grateful that no one else was there. Ana sat down on the edge of his bed and Harry soon followed.

Neither of them seemed willing to bring up what had just happened downstairs with Hermione. It had been very unexpected to say the least. Instead, Harry broke the silence with a groan.

“Oh man, I still need to write that Potions essay,” he said in disappointed realization. Snape had given him extra homework because of his poor performance in class making a potion the other day.

Ana smiled at him sympathetically. “Where’s your book? I can help if you want...”

Harry sighed. “It’s in my trunk I think—”

He halted when a muffled voice sounded through the room. Ana’s eyes widened slightly and met Harry’s in confusion.

“Did you hear that?” she asked.

“Yeah...” Harry said, his brow creasing as he looked around.

It sounded like it had come from his *trunk*. But how could that be?

He rose from the bed hesitantly and moved in front of the trunk, shooting a glance at Ana before leaning down and opening it slowly. Inside, the usual messy sight met his eyes. There were books haphazardly thrown around, along with some gadgets, extra quills, and his invisibility cloak. Everything looked normal. But just as he was about to shrug and shut the lid, the muffled voice sounded once more, only this time it was a bit clearer.

Harry’s eyebrows shot up as he stared down into the trunk. It had sounded like...

Quickly he grabbed his cloak and pulled it out along with some books. As he did so, a surprising sight met his eyes. There, at the very bottom of the trunk, half hidden by some quills sat the two-way mirror Sirius had given him last year. The one he had completely forgotten about. What was even more surprising, however, was the fact that Sirius himself was staring back out at him from the glass.

“Harry?” he asked, moving his head up a little to see past the feathered quills.

With a jolt, Harry reached down and grabbed the mirror, tugging it out from the trunk as quickly and gently as he could. He shot Ana a glance that she interpreted immediately to mean to go and shut the door so no one could overhear, which she did hurriedly. The latch gave a satisfying click, and she turned back to Harry with a nod, indicating she’d stand by it to make sure no one came barging in on them.

When Harry was satisfied it was safe to talk, he turned back to Sirius eagerly.

“Sirius...what...how...?” he sputtered, unsure of what exactly to say.

Sirius grinned a bit abashedly back up at him. “You’re wondering why I haven’t just contacted you with this thing before aren’t you?”

“Well, yes actually,” Harry said with a confused frown. “I forgot you gave this to me.”

“Yes, well, I would have used it before but Kreacher has been taking it upon himself to snatch things and hide them in random places. I gave up trying to find mine a while ago, but Molly happened upon it today when she was rearranging some furniture in the den. Little cretin hid it behind the bookshelf apparently...” he trailed off with a sour look.

Harry blinked. “Yes, but why are you contacting me at all? What if someone besides me had heard you? You could have been caught, Sirius!” he said, slightly angry at his godfather’s recklessness.

Sirius opened his mouth to respond when Harry heard a voice in the background cut in immediately at this.

“You see? What did I tell you? I told you it was a bad idea to get on that thing!”

Sirius’ look soured even further before he was pushed aside unceremoniously as Molly Weasley’s face replaced his own in the

mirror. Upon seeing Harry her look of reproach softened and she beamed up at him with a warm smile.

"Hello, Harry dear. How are you?" she asked, looking him over to see if he seemed all right.

Momentarily caught off guard by the fact that Molly was now talking to him, Harry hesitated before responding with a jolt as though just realizing she was looking up at him expectantly.

"Oh. Oh, I'm fine Mrs. Weasley. Thanks," he said, still a bit confused.

"Are you sure? Been sleeping well, I hope? You look a bit tired..."

"I'm fine, really," Harry smiled at her, touched as always by her concern.

"And Ron? He's not around is he? How is he doing? Studying, I hope," she said sternly, moving her head slightly as though expecting to catch a glimpse of her son over Harry's shoulder.

"Er...no, he's not here right now. He's in the library, actually," Harry said hesitantly.

"Oh, so he is studying! How wonderful," Molly exclaimed, her face lighting up.

"Yeah..." Harry said, scratching the back of his neck uncomfortably.

It wasn't a *complete* lie. Ron was in the library...and he was studying...but not for exams. He'd told Harry he was going to look up some new Quidditch moves so he could try them out next practice. But Molly didn't need to know that.

He owes me one for this...

Molly smiled again and was about to speak once more when Sirius' agitated voice called out from behind her.

“Can I speak to my godson now, Molly, or are you going to keep reprimanding me for using a mirror you seem quite fond of using yourself?”

Molly glowered and turned her head to face him. “I am not the one wanted by the Ministry and in danger of being sent back to Azkaban,” she snipped.

Harry could almost feel the glare Sirius was almost certainly giving Molly at that moment, but he kept his face emotionless as Molly turned back around to face him. She seemed slightly less chipper now.

“Well, you tell Ron I said hello and to study hard. And take care, dear,” she said, giving him a kind look.

“I will,” Harry said with a nod and a smile.

Molly gave him one last smile as well before Sirius’ face appeared once more in the mirror before him. He sent one last glare to the side (which Harry knew must have been directed at Molly’s departing form) and turned back to Harry with a satisfied grin.

“Sorry about that. She’s been driving me mad all day.”

“It’s fine,” Harry shook his head dismissively. Again he wondered why Sirius was contacting him. As if sensing this, Sirius’ grin faded a bit and he spoke again.

“So...how are you holding up?” he asked, and Harry couldn’t help but notice that he seemed a bit hesitant.

“Um...fine. Why?” Harry replied, somewhat suspiciously. Why was Sirius looking at him like he was unconvinced?

“Well, I heard what happened...with Ana and everything...” he trailed off unsurely.

“Oh, yeah. That. It’s awful. The whole school knows. I guess Dumbledore told you?” Harry asked.

Sirius furrowed his brows a moment. "Er...well, yes he did. But that's not what I was referring to actually. What I meant was...well...you and Ana," he stopped, looking rather uncomfortable.

"What about us?" Harry asked, confused again.

"Listen, Harry, if you need to talk about it, you know I'm always here. I know how much you liked her..." Sirius said sympathetically.

Harry frowned and opened his mouth to ask Sirius what the hell he was talking about when it occurred to him. Sirius thought Harry and Ana were still broken up. He didn't know they'd gotten back together. Harry almost laughed.

"No, Sirius, it's okay. We're—"

"Hello Sirius!"

Ana cut Harry off mid-sentence when she appeared behind him, looking down into the mirror with a bright smile. The look on Sirius' face when he saw her beside Harry was priceless. Complete and utter shock.

"Everything's fine with us, Sirius," Harry said with a hint of a laugh at his godfather's expression.

"But...I thought...Remus said...?" Sirius stopped, looking as confused as ever.

"We got back together. Lupin didn't tell you that?" Harry asked, amused.

"No. No he failed to mention it," Sirius replied, looking a bit miffed. But it disappeared in an instant to be replaced with a wide grin. "Well anyway, that's wonderful! Very good news, indeed. Here I was thinking I needed to give you a cheer up talk. I must admit I'm a little relieved. Never was very good at those..." he trailed off with a slightly embarrassed chuckle.

Ana smiled at him, and Harry looked up at her with warmth in his eyes. Sirius smiled too at this and went on.

“So, Ana, what about you? How are you faring? I heard the bad news...I’m very sorry your secret got out. I can’t imagine how difficult that must be now...” he said grimly, a hint of sadness in his gray eyes.

Ana’s smile faded and she nodded as she turned her eyes downward. “I’m...okay, I guess. I won’t lie, it’s definitely been hard. But at least I have Harry to help me get through it,” she said, turning to smile shyly at him. “He’s been wonderful.”

“Who? Harry? Are we talking about the same one?” Sirius asked, a teasing glint in his eyes. Harry gave him a look of reproach, which made Sirius break out into a wide grin. “I’m only joking. Of course he’s been wonderful. I’m his godfather after all. Must have had some sort of influence on him these past couple of years...”

Ana laughed and Harry rolled his eyes but smiled too, if a bit begrudgingly. Sirius’ eyes sparkled with mirth as he observed the two of them, but he turned his head sharply as Molly’s far off voice called out from behind him. She seemed to be yelling something.

“Right,” Sirius sighed. “Must go. You two be careful. Stick by each other. Harry, you know how to get a hold of me if you need anything.”

“I know. And we will,” Harry said with a nod.

“Bye Sirius,” Ana smiled.

The last thing they saw was Sirius rolling his eyes as another shout from Molly sounded, and then the mirror was empty once more.

“Well, that was interesting,” Harry said finally, his eyes still fixed on the mirror in his hands. “This thing is pretty nifty.”

“You know what else is nifty?” Ana asked.

“What?”

“Doing your Potions essay,” she said, replacing the mirror in his hands with his Potions book, grinning as she did so. Harry looked down at the book in his hands and groaned.

It was gonna be a long night...

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The area just outside the main entrance gate to Hogwarts was still and silent as day slowly turned to night. The only sound to be heard was the faint rustling of the trees in the distance as the wind passed through them.

This changed, however, when a loud *CRACK* suddenly broke through the air. A flock of birds, startled by the sound, flew up and away out of some nearby trees as Mundungus Fletcher appeared, swaying slightly.

He took a moment to take in his surroundings, looking up distastefully at the two statues of winged boars atop the pillars flanking the iron gate before him. With a grunt he trudged forward and hesitantly pushed it open. They swung forward easily and he took a careful step through the opening.

Nothing happened.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently his status as a trusted member of the Order was still in place. He never would have been able to step onto Hogwarts grounds otherwise, what with all the protection spells in place and everything. He'd been afraid that his last, rather disastrous meeting with Lupin on Christmas had changed that. Apparently not.

Mundungus had been laying low since then, not wanting to cause any more suspicion to surround him than there already was. But upon thinking (and drinking) about it, he had decided that a personal, face-to-face meeting with Dumbledore was in order. And since he was still too afraid to show his face at Grimmauld Place, he'd come straight to Hogwarts instead.

He wanted back on the Carrows case. And he didn't care how he'd get there. His "source" had been unsuccessful in giving him any useful information about their whereabouts, much to his frustration. The best he could do was appeal to Dumbledore to be allowed back

on the case. The Order probably had inside information he could use to his advantage.

And he desperately needed that information. He desperately needed it because he desperately needed to be the one to catch the Carrows. It was like an obsession now. His excessive drinking had turned it into something bigger than it was, but all he knew was that he needed it. Needed the glory it would give him. Needed the respect. Needed the boost to his ego.

People had started to believe he was a drunken fool and nothing more. That much could be deduced from what Lupin had told him on Christmas. They didn't even respect him enough to keep him on the case. Well, he'd show them. He'd catch the Carrows all on his own. All he needed was Dumbledore's permission...

With this thought in mind, he stumbled his way up the path to the castle, heading through the large oak entrance doors when he reached them. He paused in the entrance hall a moment as he looked at the many halls and staircases before him in confusion. If only he could remember where the Headmaster's office was...

With another grunt, he opted for the large main staircase leading upward. It probably wouldn't be all that difficult to find. With this uplifting thought in mind, he quickened his step.

By the time he reached the top of the stairs, he was huffing and puffing excessively. He paused a moment to catch his breath and eyed the next staircase warily. Perhaps it was on this floor, he thought, which was really just a way of giving himself a reason not to have to climb anymore stairs.

He shuffled forward down the empty hall and moved his hand in a familiar motion towards the flask at his belt. He caught it up and brought it to his lips eagerly, but just before he could get a taste of the Firewhiskey inside, he heard a low whispering coming from somewhere ahead of him. The voices seemed to be sounding from just around the corner of the hall. Being the sneaky, nosy fellow he was, Mundungus pressed himself against the wall and perked up his very attuned ears (from years of practice) to listen.

Meanwhile, around the corner of the hall, three boys stood in an alcove, talking quietly. Or rather, one was talking while the other two were listening obediently.

“Did you get me everything I asked for?” Malfoy asked eagerly in a hushed voice.

Crabbe and Goyle both nodded quickly. “It wasn’t easy, Draco. The last one was especially hard,” Goyle said thickly.

Malfoy threw him a tiresome glare. “I didn’t ask if it was easy, I asked if you got everything. And I’ll believe *that* when I see it. Still wondering if it was smart asking you two dunderheads to do it,” he spat.

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other and shrugged, earning yet another look of disgust from Malfoy.

“Whatever, all that matters is that you got all the ingredients. Now I can brew it tonight. It plays a crucial role in the plan. I can’t afford to take any chances of being caught. This *cannot* be screwed up, do you hear me? I’ve had specific instructions from Father, and I intend to see them through,” he said with a hard determination in his voice.

Crabbe nodded wordlessly, but Goyle looked a bit unsure. “Er...what exactly is the plan again?” he asked nervously.

Draco heaved a heavy sigh and shook his head angrily. “Honestly, can’t you retain any information in that thick skull of yours for longer than a period of five bloody minutes?” he asked in frustration. When Goyle simply stared back at him dumbly, Draco gritted his teeth.

“Twenty one days from today. That’s when it will be ready. That’s when I will make the move. Are you with me so far?” he asked, irritated. When Goyle nodded, Draco proceeded to lay out his plan to them in specific detail and instruction...

Mundungus listened in growing astonishment as the boy’s words reached his seasoned ears. It was fate. It had to be. There was no way this could have worked any more in his favor. Once the Draco kid had explained everything, Mundungus hurried back the way he had come as quickly and quietly as possible. There was no longer a

need to speak with Dumbledore. The Carrows had just been handed to him on a silver platter.

Twenty one days from today, he thought as he exited the castle, lifting his flask for a long and satisfying drink.

Twenty-one days from today...

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Three weeks later...

The school year was almost at its end. Harry sat at the window seat in his dorm looking out into the dark, starless night and sighed.

He couldn't have been more bored.

Ana was at one of her lessons with Professor Shrubblock, Ron was off in the library with Hermione, presumably studying, and everyone else was either in there with them or in the common room. But studying was the last thing Harry wanted to do at the moment. He looked around the room glumly for the umpteenth time as though willing something interesting to appear before him.

But the same sight met his eyes. Several books were to be seen lying here and there around and atop his bed. Those were all a no. His Trick Tumbler lay gleaming on his nightstand. Also a no. Even if he had someone to prank, he didn't have the tools needed to achieve said prank. A leather case sat open next to his bed, revealing the polished sword Sirius had given him all those months ago to practice with. Harry considered doing this for a moment before nixing it as well. He didn't really feel up to it and it was more fun when you had a partner to spar with anyways, which he didn't.

His attention was taken off the leather case suddenly when his scar gave a rather painful twinge. He reached up to rub at it in a motion he was quite familiar with and grimaced. It had been doing that off and on all day for some reason. And that uneasy feeling had returned to him with it. Like something wasn't right...

But Harry pushed the feeling aside as quickly as it had come. It was nothing he hadn't felt before, after all. He sighed again and just as he was about to consider (with a shudder) opening one of his lesson books, the door flew open and a very disgruntled looking Ron came in.

"Blimey, I swear to Merlin, if I have to read one more chapter on the history of elf riots I am going to off myself," he said as he threw himself on his bed with a groan.

Harry chuckled slightly at this. "Rioting elves...sounds pretty funny to me," he said.

"It's not," came Ron's muffled reply. His face was currently buried in his pillow. He lifted his head to look at Harry with a serious expression. "Bloody boring is what it is. You're lucky your girlfriend doesn't force you to study," he said with a grimace.

"Well, I'm sure she will when she gets back from her lesson," Harry told him, running a hand through his hair with another sigh. "And don't talk to me about boring. I've had absolutely nothing to do all night except sit here staring at all the books I should be reading."

Ron sat up on his elbows and looked around the room dolefully. "It's still early. There has to be *something* we can do..." he trailed off. His searching gaze halted, however, when it came upon Harry's open sword case. His eyes lit up at the sight.

"Oy, I know! Let's have a duel! You can teach me how to swordfight," he exclaimed excitedly, sitting up straight now.

Harry furrowed his brows at him from where he sat at the window. "We can't. I only have one sword," he said.

Ron rolled his eyes at him and stood from the bed quickly. "You've honestly forgotten about the Room of Requirement? It'll have a wall full of swords if we need them! And it's a good place to do it too. Come on, let's go," he said with a grin, already moving towards the door.

Harry raised his eyebrows at this and turned his eyes to the sword lying in the case once more. Ron had a point about the Room of Requirement. It *would* be the perfect place to practice. And having a duel with someone again did sound like it would be fun, even *if* Ron had no idea what he was doing...

Harry was jolted from his thoughts when Ron's red head popped back into the doorway from the hall suddenly.

"Well? You coming, or not?" he asked impatiently.

With a conceding grin, Harry lifted himself off his seat and swept up the leather sword case quickly as he passed it. He probably would have agreed to any idea Ron would have suggested to rid himself of his boredom, but he had to admit, this actually did sound as though it would be a good time. At least they'd be doing something.

He quickened his steps with these thoughts in mind and hurried to catch up with Ron, wondering briefly how Ana was doing with her lesson...

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Ana, in fact, had done very well with her lesson. So well that Professor Shrublock had let her go early for the night.

She made her way down the halls towards the Gryffindor common room, reaching up to cover her mouth when a yawn overcame her. It was only then she noticed that she had ink all over her hands.

Bugger, she thought as she stared at them, frowning. *Must have broken my quill without realizing...*

With a sigh she looked up to see where she was. She was happy to learn that there was a bathroom nearby and made her way towards it purposefully. Pushing open the door with her ink spotted hands, Ana entered the empty bathroom and immediately made for the sinks. Grabbing some soap, she turned on the water, scrubbing furiously as the ink was being particularly stubborn and not wanting to come off.

So engaged was she in this task, she didn't even hear or notice when a second person entered the room as well.

After a few more thorough scrubs, the ink had finally disappeared for the most part, and Ana turned off the rushing water, instantly silencing the room once more. When she glanced up at her reflection in the mirror before her, she gave a violent start and gasped in surprise when a second figure could be seen behind her. Whipping around quickly, she instinctively reached for her wand only to stop just as suddenly when she saw who the person was.

"Harry," she breathed, placing a hand over her chest where her heart still pounded rapidly. "Merlin, you scared me..."

Harry smirked and stepped closer to her, emerging from the shadows of the dimly lit room. Ana watched him and found it strange that her heartbeat was being curiously slow in returning to normal.

"What, um...what are you doing in here?" she asked, furrowing her brows slightly.

Harry stepped closer still and Ana took an involuntary step back, bumping into the sink behind her softly. He just looked so...*predatory*. She couldn't help it.

"Not happy to see me, love?" he asked quietly, stepping even closer towards her.

Their bodies now stood inches apart, and he slowly placed both of his hands on either side of the sink behind her, effectively closing her in. Ana swallowed as she looked up into his eyes. Since when did they have tiny flecks of gray in them?

"N-no...no, I'm always happy to see you," she said hesitantly, trying to smile. Why did she feel so uncomfortable? Like she wanted to run away?

He smirked again. "Glad to hear it..." he whispered, inching his face slowly downwards toward her own.

Before she even had time to think, his lips were upon hers. Ana closed her eyes and waited for the warm feeling to envelop her that always came with his kisses...but it never did. Harry's lips crushed her own in a rough, almost cruel manner, and she quickly lifted her hands to his chest and shoved him off of her. As she stared up at him, a sudden and terrifying realization hit her.

"You're not Harry..." she stated slowly in a horrified whisper.

He still had her pinned against the sink and when these words came from her he smirked again. Only this time the smirk was all too familiar.

Ana felt her face drain of blood as she stared up at this impostor, completely struck dumb when she realized whom it was.

"Malfoy...?" she managed to say, a hint of disbelief apparent in her voice.

"Well, well, well. Smarter than you look, aren't you Brighton? Or should I say Carrows?" he said, flashing her a shark-like grin. But even more horrifying was the fact that it was, for all appearances, Harry grinning back at her so horribly.

It's not Harry, she reminded herself. Harry would never act so cold. Harry would never look at her with anything but warmth in his eyes. No, this wasn't Harry. This wasn't Harry at all...

Ana shrank back against the sink even further at this, though it didn't do much good. He was still much too close for her comfort. Briefly, the thought of him kissing her just now flickered through her mind, and the fear and disgust she felt about it became apparent in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"What do want?" she said, trying to make herself as small and unnoticeable as possible under his penetrating gaze. Malfoy raised his eyebrow at this and stared at her a moment before a similar look of disgust came upon his own face.

"Ugh, relax. *You* are the last thing that I want. In that way, at least," he sneered, before grinning horribly once more. "I just figured if I had

the wrappings I may as well get the gift too. Or at least a taste..." he chuckled, raising a hand to brush against her cheek.

She swerved her head away from his hand quickly and threw him a murderous glare. "Go to Hell, Malfoy," she spat.

Ana then turned and pushed his hand away from where it gripped the sink beside her and made for the door, but Draco was quicker. His hand shot out like lightning, catching her arm in a brutal grip and hauling her back towards him easily. She tried to wrench her arm away, but he was too strong.

"Ah, ah, ah," he said, shaking his head at her. "Where do you think you're going? We have plans, you and I."

"What are you talking about?" Ana demanded with a scowl. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest...she could feel the terror start to pulse through her veins.

"I've set up a little meeting. A...*reunion*, if you will," he smirked again. "No need to thank me. Anyways, they're expecting you. You're the guest of honor, it turns out. It's my duty to deliver you."

Reunion?...They?

And all at once it hit her like a slap in the face. She did not even attempt to hide the fear in her voice now. Her hands started to shake, but there was nothing she could do to stop them.

"Malfoy...Draco...*please*," she breathed, looking up at him pleadingly. "Don't...don't do this..."

"Shut up," he said sharply, all traces of amusement wiped from his face. His eyes...Harry's eyes...looked down at her coldly, and he spoke again with a frighteningly calm determination.

"You will do as I say, understand? Now, we're gonna take a walk. If you make a sound...*any* sound at all...you will regret it dearly. If we meet anyone along the way and you try anything, not only will I hurt you," he squeezed her arm painfully, making her wince. "I will hurt whoever that person may be."

Ana shook her head, convinced that she could still talk sense into him. "Malfoy, you *can't* do this. Y-you'll be caught! What if it's teacher? You wouldn't hurt a teacher—"

"As of tonight I am no longer a student here," he cut her off quickly. "I have more important duties to uphold than sitting in a desk listening to lectures all day," he paused as he looked down at her with a strange gleam in his eyes, but Ana was almost certain that he didn't really see her. They looked a bit unfocused...manic even...

"Finally," he said quietly. "*Finally* after all these years I am going to make my Father proud. After this night, I join him. Killing a person or two along the way won't make any difference to me. It may, in fact, bolster my image," he said, the smirk returning. "What do you think?"

As she stared up at him, she knew all hope was lost. He was past help...past sense...There was nothing she or anyone else could say to convince him that he was making the wrong choice. Her heart sunk to the pit of her stomach at this realization.

"I think you're sick," she whispered. "I think you need help—"

"No more words!" he growled angrily. A hint of something akin to uncertainty flashed through his eyes, but it was gone before Ana could identify it properly. He looked viciously down at her once more. "I've wasted enough on you as it is. Now *walk*."

Malfoy jabbed his wand into Ana's side painfully and shoved her forward towards the door, never taking his hand from her arm. She obeyed numbly as they walked down the halls. Her feet propelled her forward but she couldn't have been more unaware of what she was doing. She tried to work her mind to think of something...*anything*...she could do, but the immense fear that overtook her entire being prevented any logical thoughts from coming.

This is it...it's over...they'll kill me...

These words were the only ones that echoed through her mind, but little good they did her. Malfoy (as Harry) steered her forward quickly and efficiently, his wand still in place at her back, hidden carefully by the sleeve of his robes. They descended down through the castle

floor by floor. Ana could hardly believe that they had met no one yet...but just as this thought occurred to her, a figure Ana recognized rounded the corner in front of them.

It was Ginny.

The red head slowed as she saw them before smiling brightly. "Hey guys!" she said.

Malfoy and Ana slowed too, and Ana could feel the pressure of the wand on her back increase slightly in warning. When she had seen it was Ginny, her heart leapt in joy only to plummet back down almost as quickly. Malfoy's words came back to her...he'd hurt Ginny if she tried anything...Ana knew instantly that she couldn't take the risk. Her life wasn't the only one at stake here.

"Hey Ginny," Malfoy said, smiling now, doing a very good job at acting like Harry. Course he already had the appearance thing down, so it wasn't all that difficult, really. Ana forced a smile at her too and hoped that it looked convincing.

"What are you two lovebirds up to tonight?" Ginny grinned mischievously.

"You know we don't kiss and tell," Malfoy laughed. "Isn't that right, Ana?" he asked turning to her. She saw the flash of warning in his eyes to play along and swallowed the lump in her throat as she nodded wordlessly, forcing another smile at Ginny.

"You're sneaking out to the Greenhouses again, aren't you? I know how much you guys go out there, you can't fool me," Ginny said with a knowing grin, throwing the briefest of winks at Ana.

Ana almost missed it.

Harry and her had never snuck out to the Greenhouses before. Ginny had winked at her. *Ginny knew.*

Ana tried her hardest to keep the shock from her face as she stared at the grinning Ginny before her. One would never guess in a million years that the girl suspected anything was amiss with the situation.

But somehow she'd figured it out. Somehow she knew something was wrong. Ana almost laughed out loud but quickly resumed her fake smile as Malfoy responded.

“You caught us,” he said with a bashful grin, pulling Ana closer to him in mock affection.

“Well, you two have fun. Try to stay out of too much trouble,” Ginny said with a chuckle. She gave Ana one last unreadable look before making her way down the hallway once more.

[illegible]

When she rounded the corner, out of sight, Ginny stopped and sank against the wall as a billion thoughts rushed through her head. She'd almost given herself away when she had rounded that corner to come face to face with Harry and Ana...or whoever that was with her. She'd thought quickly, however, and played along with it. Thank Merlin she was a good actress.

So someone was pretending to be Harry. Of that she was sure. She'd just come from upstairs where she'd seen the real Harry and Ron heading towards the Room of Requirement. There was no way he'd make it down here that fast. And even if he could, the way the fake Harry had reacted to her Greenhouse comment confirmed her suspicions. And she had thought Ana looked a little paler than usual...

So it wasn't Harry. But then who was it? Was Ana in trouble?

Ginny didn't know. All she knew was that she needed to find the real Harry and tell him what she had just seen...and fast. So, with a deep breath, Ginny sprinted away down the hall and up the stairs towards the Room of Requirement...praying she'd make it in time to prevent anything from happening to Ana.

Harry would know what to do.

[illegible]

Back with Malfoy and Ana, things were looking worse for her than ever. Malfoy pushed her forward quickly, seemingly more determined than ever to reach their destination after the run in with Ginny. He said nothing as they made their way down to the ground floor, just looked ahead with that same cold determination in his eyes.

Ana watched as they approached the great oak entrance doors and knew immediately that he was planning on taking her outside. If that happened, there would be little hope for her. She didn't know how she knew this...she just did. The feeling of hopelessness and fear gripped her soul stronger than ever.

But just as Malfoy reached out a hand to throw open the doors, a voice cut through the silent hall quickly.

"Stupefy!"

Ana gasped in shock as she saw the red light shoot towards them, hitting Malfoy dead on. His grip on her broke as he fell to the floor at her feet with a thud, and she whipped her head around to see whom her rescuer was. The sight that met her eyes was surprising, to say the least.

"Mr. Fletcher?" she sputtered in shock.

Mundungus emerged fully from his hiding place near the stairs and kept his gaze trained on Malfoy's fallen form as he stepped nearer.

"Oh, thank Merlin," she breathed as he approached. He was a member of the Order. He could help her, she thought with a rush of relief as she went on. "He was trying to take me outside....it isn't Harry, it's Malfoy. He—"

Her hurried words were cut short when Mundungus held up a hand to silence her. Ana couldn't help but notice that he seemed to be having trouble standing up straight as he swayed back and forth. He shot one last glance at Malfoy before reaching out and taking her arm, pulling her forward gently.

"C'mon..." he slurred slightly as they moved forward.

“But...wait, are you going to just leave him there? Shouldn't we get a teacher? Or the Headmaster?” she asked quickly, shooting a glance behind her at Malfoy's supine form.

“Time fer that later, dear. Now, les' go...” he said, pulling her forward once again.

Ana frowned and turned her head, noticing with a sinking feeling that they were headed for the doors leading outside. She also noticed for the first time that a distinct and nearly overwhelming odor of Firewhiskey was emanating off of him.

“Mr. Fletcher...where are we going?” she asked hesitantly. And then another, more troubling question came to her. “How did you know it wasn't really Harry?” she asked suspiciously.

He ignored her and pushed open the doors, taking her with him as he stepped out into the dark night. She tried to halt her steps but his grip merely tightened.

“Mr. Fletcher...please...you're hurting me,” she said. “Let go!”

But Mundungus couldn't have been more unaware of the scared girl beside him. His grip was like iron as he pulled her along across the grounds. Ana's eyes widened in fear when he began muttering to himself.

“They're in the forest. Tha's where I'll catch 'em...”

She could hardly believe this was happening. It was like one of her nightmares all over again. Mundungus was going to bring her to them. He wanted to be the one to capture them. It all made sense now...

“You're insane,” she shook her head as she looked up at him in disbelief. “They'll kill you without a second thought. You don't know what they're capable of...I do! You'll *die* if you take me in there, don't you realize?” she told him quickly. When he continued to ignore her she went on, more and more panicked with each step that brought them closer to the dark, unmoving trees.

“Please don’t do this,” she cried, feeling tears of frustration seeping into her eyes. “You don’t need me anyways! If you want to catch them so bad, then go in there yourself! They want to *kill* me, don’t you know that?”

This time Mundungus must have heard her, for he turned to her with that same strange gleam she had seen at Christmas in his glazed eyes.

“Oh, but they’ll be expecting *you*,” he rasped, and Ana had to turn her face away in disgust as the smell of his alcohol soaked breath wafted over her. “I can bargain with ‘em...catch ‘em unawares. Imagine all the gold I’ll get fer this...the free drinks men will buy me...the *respect*...”

He turned his head away from her then and continued muttering nonsensically. That was when the tears finally escaped Ana’s eyes, cascading down her face as all hope was washed from her. The man was obviously not right in the head. It was all over...

They entered the forest swiftly, Mundungus tugging her along without much care for her comfort. She stumbled and almost fell a few times, but his grip on her held her up and pulled forward.

Images from her nightmare those many months ago flickered through her mind. How frighteningly similar this all was...she couldn’t breathe...the trees seemed to be closing in on her...there was no escape...

But the nightmare was about to turn into reality.

They entered a clearing, but before Ana even had a chance to take in her surroundings, a voice from the side of them shouted out through the night fiercely.

“Avada Kedavra!”

And like with Malfoy back in the castle, Mundungus’ grip broke from her arm as he too hit the ground with a thud. The green flash of light lit up the clearing and struck with a force so powerful, it threw Ana to the ground as well.

She threw her hands out to break her fall as she hit the cold and unyielding earth with a whimper. Shaky breaths wracked her body as a pair of boots came into her field of vision. Slowly lifting her head, her eyes traveled up, up, up the cloaked form until they met with the terrifying grin that had haunted her nightmares for months.

“Hello Anabelle.”

[illegible]

AN: Gah! Don't kill me! I know it's another horrible cliffie...I'm really, really sorry. Anyways, I wrote like a fiend to get this chapter done by today because school starts tomorrow and I didn't want to keep you guys waiting much longer. I hope you liked the chapter though, despite its rather sinister ending. I PROMISE you I will try my absolute hardest to get the next one up as quick as possible.

Thanks to all the people who reviewed last chapter! BullDozer, monde, Toxic-Neon, actress19, Friendlyfangirl, Irish Maid, LettaR999, Kelli, Amber, Reader, Twinkle Phantom, My personal façade, jolly-for-heart, spastik-fruitcake, GLCW2, Sword.of.Angel, blueclouds96, Inziladun, harry-an-ginny, Illusion To Life, and darthme1011.

All of you are amazing. Thank you so much for your comments. I appreciate them to no end. And if you're reading my story, please let me know what you think! I mean it when I say your comments inspire me, not to mention they push me to write faster. :) Anyways, thanks again guys! I'll try and update soon. Have an awesome day!

[illegible]

AN: Hi guys. I'm so sorry to have to do this. It breaks my heart, actually. But I felt the need to inform you all about what has happened. My computer was stolen a few days ago, and my almost finished next chapter was on it. I'm not sure when I'll be able to update again. It's kind of disheartened me a bit. Right now writing is the last thing I want to do. Again, I can't tell you how sorry I am. But please don't take this to mean that I am abandoning this story. I am not. I love it too much and I have put far too much time and effort into it to just stop writing it. I just need to find the will to get started again. So for those of you reading my story, please don't give up on it. I WILL update eventually. Thank you all so much for your support and reviews. And for reading as well. You make it worth it, and I am glad that some people have come to like my story. It means the world to me. :) So thank you, and once again I am very sorry about this. I will do my best to get going again and update soon. Have a great day everyone. :)

Chapter 20

“Ron...”

Swish.

“Ron!”

Swish. Swoosh.

“Ron, stop! Bloody hell, you’re going to kill someone with that thing...”

Ron lowered his arm, which had until this time been swinging a sword around in a violent and completely unskilled fashion. Harry was looking at him exasperatedly from where he stood in the middle of the Room of Requirement.

This had been a bad idea. Ron, it seemed, was even more dangerous to be around with a sword than he was with a wand. In a completely unintentional way, of course.

“What are you talking about? I did it exactly like you did,” Ron said indignantly.

“I didn’t wave my arms about like a crazy person and fling my sword completely over my head *three* times, Ron,” Harry replied, almost tiredly.

Ron shifted uncomfortably. “It slipped,” he said, shrugging and looking slightly abashed.

Harry’s eyebrows rose so high they disappeared beneath the dark hair that fell across his scarred forehead. He scoffed and was about to respond when the sound of the door opening cut him short. Both young men turned at the noise and sported similar looks of surprise when the person who had just entered came into view.

“Hermione!” Ron exclaimed, a grin crossing his features. “What are you doing here? How’d you know where to find me?” he asked, furrowing his brows a bit. His grin faded quickly however as his eyes

swerved to Harry, whose face had turned expressionless at Hermione's entrance. He'd almost forgotten they still weren't speaking to one another.

Hermione stepped slowly forward, pausing not far from the doorway, as though she were scared to venture any further. She wrung nervous hands together, shooting the occasional glance at Harry before answering.

"I couldn't find you in the common room," she shrugged. "Seamus told me he'd seen you heading here. And no offense Ron, but it's actually Harry I came to see..."

Harry's head snapped up at these unexpected words, and he looked at Hermione in ill-concealed surprise. Ron, rather than looking offended, seemed to beam with happiness over the fact that his two best friends were in the same room and not screaming at one another.

"Me?" Harry asked finally. The confusion he felt was written all over his face.

Hermione swallowed and nodded hesitantly. She took a deep breath and composed herself for what she had to say next. "Er...yes," she said. "I wanted to...I mean I...that is...Harry, I came to say I'm...I really—"

"Hermione, wait. It's...it's okay," Harry cut in quickly.

Hermione's words halted at the sound of Harry's voice. It took her a moment to register what it was he had said.

"Huh?" she asked, in a very un-Hermione-like manner. Her mouth fell open slightly and her brows narrowed as she stared at him.

Harry stared back at her, a sincere and soft look upon his face. He knew what she was trying to do. She was trying to apologize. He ran a hand through his hair with a soft sigh and let his eyes drift to the floor. Briefly the image of Ana's smiling face appeared in his mind, and he found himself smiling slightly as well as he recalled a memory.

He remembered that day so many months ago when she had been in this same position when Ron had tried apologizing to her. He remembered how she had asked no questions. How she hadn't blown up with anger or indignation. How she hadn't held onto a grudge. Instead she'd just smiled and forgave him without a second thought, and it had been like nothing was ever wrong in the first place. He remembered thinking he could learn a lot from her actions. She'd handled it all so well...

Like an angel... he thought, smiling more now. And suddenly everything was clear.

"I said it's okay," he repeated. He lifted his eyes to meet Hermione's still confused ones and gave her yet another sincere look. "Hermione, look...you don't have to say anything. We both did and said some stupid things. Things we regret," he said softly. "I don't want to fight with you anymore. I've...I've missed you. Missed our friendship. I've missed the trio. The three of us have been through far too much to let anything get in between us now." Harry chuckled slightly and sent Hermione a small, bashful smile as he shrugged.

"But...but..." she sputtered in disbelief. "But I was horrible to you! I was the reason why you and Ana broke up! I was stubborn and awful!" she nearly yelled. It was apparent that she had been expecting another argument with him. That he wouldn't accept her apology as easily as he had. She hadn't even gotten the *chance* to apologize yet. What was going on?

"Yeah, but I know...*should* have known...that you weren't doing it to hurt me. I was just as much at fault as you," he said with a small smile. The more he spoke the words, the more it felt as though a large weight was being lifted off his shoulders. He was done letting his pride stand in the way of his friendship.

"So, what do you say?" he asked. "Truce?" Harry held out his hand towards the very still Hermione as an offering for her to shake. He watched as her eyes shined with unshed tears and grew slightly concerned when she began to tremble a bit. Perhaps he had misjudged her intentions...

But before he had a chance to retract his hand and mutter an apology, he found himself thrown back as Hermione rushed forward, ignored his hand completely, and enveloped him in a tight embrace. Surprised, yet pleased at the unexpected reaction, Harry held her close as she sobbed onto his shoulder and smiled in relief.

“So that’s a yes, then?” he asked, grinning now.

“Oh, Harry...” she said, her voice thick from her crying. “Of course it’s a yes! I’m so sorry...” She clung to him still, seemingly unable to believe that they were really friends again.

“Me too, Hermione,” he said, not caring that his shirt was getting more soaked by the second. He had his friend back. That was all that mattered.

They stood there for a moment, both with similar looks of relief and happiness on their faces, when a large pair of arms wrapped around them unexpectedly.

“Oh isn’t it wonderful! It’s like one big happy family again!” Ron’s overly dramatic voice cut through the air, and he lifted a hand to wipe an imaginary tear from his cheek. “God bless us...everyone!”

Harry gave a hearty laugh, but Hermione frowned immediately and backed up enough to give Ron a good whack on the shoulder. “It’s not funny Ronald! Why must you insist on ruining everything...” she said exasperatedly, though even she couldn’t help the small smile from tugging at her lips as she wiped the last of her tears away.

Ron responded by grinning cheekily at her, throwing a lanky arm around her shoulders and pulling her close again. “You’re cute when you’re angry, did you know?”

“Shut up,” she said, her cheeks flushing with a hint of pink as she tried not to smile. Ron merely laughed and pulled her in for a kiss. Harry, who had since backed up slightly to give them space, made a face at this and tried to look disgusted.

“Ugh, get a room you two,” he said, a slight chuckle escaping him.

Ron ignored him and continued to kiss Hermione (who despite being so seemingly angry at him before was offering little to no protest at these actions), while Harry merely rolled his eyes and busied himself with putting his sword back in its case. It was at that moment, just as Harry was snapping the case shut, that the door to the Room of Requirement flew open once more, only this time it was a flustered and out of breath Ginny who entered.

Ron and Hermione broke apart abruptly at the interruption, and Harry looked over from his crouched position on the floor, furrowing his brows a bit as Ginny bent over to place her hands on her knees, desperately trying to catch her breath.

“Ginny?” he asked, rising slowly and looking a bit puzzled. Ron studied his sister with a similar expression of confusion.

“Did you run here?” he asked incredulously. “Why are you out of breath?”

The three of them grew concerned in the few moments it took for Ginny to respond. And when she finally straightened, still breathing heavily, it was Harry she looked to.

“Harry...you...downstairs...Ana...” she said, having trouble forming the words through her need for air. Harry’s brows furrowed immediately at the mention of Ana’s name.

“Ana?” he repeated. “Ginny what’s wrong? Is Ana okay?” Quickly Harry went over the possibility that she wasn’t okay in his head, a sliver of fear forming within him despite his efforts not to jump to conclusions. She was fine. She was in her lesson with Shrubblock. But then why did Ginny look...panicked?

Finally seeming to have caught her breath, Ginny looked to him with what could only be described as a troubled expression. “Harry...I saw her downstairs. With you.”

“With me?” he asked, perplexed. Harry didn’t know quite what to make of this statement. One glance in Ron and Hermione’s direction showed that they were just as confused as he was.

"What d'you mean you saw her with him?" Ron asked his sister, looking a bit incredulous again. "You haven't been Confunded have you? Harry's right here, Ginny. Has been for a while now."

Ginny turned murderous eyes upon Ron. "No, *Ronald*, I haven't been Confunded. I saw her. Downstairs. With Harry."

"Ana's at her lesson, Ginny," Harry said, before giving Ron a warning glance. The last thing he wanted was to have to break up a hexing match between the two of them. "She doesn't get out this early. You must have seen someone else or—"

"It wasn't someone else," she cut in, looking at Harry with a determined, no-nonsense gaze. "It was her. And she was with you."

"But—"

"Harry, she was with YOU. Now, unless you have an identical twin brother running around that I don't know about..." Ginny trailed off, never losing her serious expression.

Harry continued to stare at her uncomprehendingly, but something cold was beginning to stir from somewhere deep within him. When he turned and saw the slightly shocked look of dawning recognition crossing Hermione's face, however, his worst suspicions about this whole situation were confirmed.

"Polyjuice..." Hermione whispered, turning fear-filled eyes towards Harry.

Ginny nodded gravely. "I thought that too. I ran into them in the hall and knew something was wrong. I'd just seen you two," she said, looking from Ron to Harry. "There was no way you could have gotten down there that fast."

Harry said nothing. His mind felt sluggish trying to figure out what all this meant. Ginny watched him for a moment before continuing on, looking a bit unsure and anxious now.

"They were headed somewhere," she said. "Harry...she looked scared."

Harry seemed to jolt out of his numbed state at this. He met Ginny's eyes before turning his head and swearing sharply under his breath. The sliver of fear had just turned into something far larger and harder to ignore.

"Blimey," Ron said quietly. "Who would want to impersonate you?" he asked, looking at Harry in confusion.

"I think the better question is," Hermione cut in, looking calm but ill at ease, "what do they want with Ana?"

Harry's ears were ringing. His skin felt hot. The room seemed smaller than it had been only a few minutes before. His mouth turned dry and he wouldn't have been able to speak even if he had something to say. He barely registered the fact that Ginny was talking again.

"I came as fast as I could," she said, seeming even more uncertain now. "I guess going to the Headmaster or a teacher would have been smarter but...I had to make sure it really wasn't you..." Her words trailed off feebly as she continued to stare at Harry.

He didn't appear to be listening, however. A sharp, piercing panic was pulsing through him unheeded now. And with a jolt it seemed to occur to him that they were all just standing around when Ana was out there somewhere...in trouble and possibly even danger. The realization thrust him into action.

"Did you see where they went?" he asked Ginny quickly. She looked a bit startled at the suddenness of this change in him.

"No...I'm sorry I...I'm not sure. They could be heading anywhere," she said.

"We have to go see Dumbledore," Hermione said quickly. "He'll know what to do. Come on."

She grabbed Ron's hand and made a beeline for the door. Ginny followed them out into the hallway and the three of them were out of the room completely before they noticed that Harry was still standing in the same spot.

“Harry...what are you doing? Come on!” Hermione said urgently, letting go of Ron’s hand and taking a few steps toward the door again.

But Harry had no intention of going with them. The plan he’d begun to form in his mind did not involve going to see the Headmaster. Hermione watched as Harry came out into the hallway to join them, and she turned again to make her way to Dumbledore’s office but Harry’s voice stopped her short.

“I’m not coming with you.”

Hermione froze. Ron and Ginny had paused as well and looked at Harry as though he’d grown a second head.

“What?” Hermione asked, turning to him with an equally incredulous look on her face. “Harry, Ana’s in trouble! Dumbledore will—”

“Dumbledore will help, yes,” Harry said. “Which is why you three need to go get him.”

“What do you mean us three?” Ron asked, looking dumbfounded by his friend’s behavior. “What about you?”

Harry said nothing, but an almost fierce look of determination had crossed his face. Hermione saw it and paled. It was as though she could read his thoughts and see exactly what it was he was planning. Harry stared back with a stubborn defiance.

“Harry...” she said, not very much more than a whisper. “No. Harry, no! We’re sticking together! You can’t go off on your own...what if this is a trap or—”

“We’re wasting time!” he nearly shouted back at her. “The sooner I get going, the sooner I can find her.” He paused, not quite able to meet any of their gazes. “What if this has something to do with her parents? She could be dead—” he halted abruptly, unable to finish the horrific thought. Ana wasn’t dead. He’d find her. And when he did he’d make whoever did this pay.

“Harry—”

“Go,” Harry said, cutting Hermione’s plea short as he began to back away down the opposite direction. “GO! Get Dumbledore. Tell him what’s happened. I’ll be fine.”

With one last look at his friends, Harry turned and began to run down the corridor.

“HARRY!” Hermione yelled to his retreating back. She made to follow him but was halted by Ron’s hand on her arm pulling her back.

“Hermione, come on,” he said, tugging her forward. “We don’t have a choice. You know Harry; he’s not going to listen. The sooner we get Dumbledore the sooner we can help him.”

The fact that Ron was the voice of reason this time was what ultimately brought Hermione crashing back to what was happening. She looked at him before turning one last time to stare in the direction Harry had gone, though he had long since turned the corner and vanished. Finally she nodded and murmured her assent, allowing Ron to take her hand once more as they hurried forward after Ginny who led the way. Before turning their own corner, Hermione glanced one last time down the corridor.

Good luck, Harry...

And with that, she hurried onward with a steely determination, thinking she’d be damned to get her best friend back only to lose him again in one night.

XX
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Harry ran.

He urged his muscles to near breaking point, pushing himself harder than he ever had before. But he did not feel the burning pain in his chest. Nor did he stop when his lungs threatened to burst from need of air. The only thing Harry could see or feel or think about was Ana and his need to get to her.

Where was she now? Was she hurt? Was she thinking about him? Wondering where he was? Wishing he was there with her? These thoughts were torturing him. They increased the already prevalent panic that was steadily erasing all coherent thought from him. If she was hurt—

No. No, he would not think of that. He *couldn't*. Ana was all right. She was fine. And even if she wasn't, he had to keep telling himself this for his own good. Harry did not want to imagine what would happen if she was not okay. The thought alone brought a different, and much deeper burning to his chest. A despair that would have no cure. But she was fine...she had to be...

Harry came to the top of a staircase and stopped abruptly. He glanced down it and then turned his head to look on down the hallway. And it was then he realized his “plan” wasn't much of a plan at all. Had he expected to just run into them? He had no other way of finding her other than searching the castle and hoping he'd get lucky. But he had no idea which way they had went. Hogwarts was enormous. Precious time was being wasted. Time he didn't have.

Come on, Potter, think! There's gotta be a better way to find her...

Harry wracked his mind for the answer as he stood there, panting. What he needed was a way to locate Ana immediately. What he needed was—

And with a jolt, Harry had the answer at once.

“Of course!” he said aloud, wanting to kick himself for being so thick. The Marauder's Map. What he needed was the Marauder's Map. And just like that, Harry was off and running again, only this time it was with a clear destination in mind.

Ignoring the startled looks he received when he burst like a mad man into the common room, Harry headed straight for the stairs to the boy's dormitory.

“Oi, Harry! You all right?” he vaguely heard Dean Thomas say from somewhere behind him. But there was no time to respond. He took the stairs two at a time, bursting through the door to his room and

throwing himself to the floor before his trunk where the Map lay hidden.

Harry threw the items in the trunk behind him, not caring where they landed in his desperate search for the key to finding Ana. Finally he saw it...sitting there at the very bottom. In record time, Harry had yanked it out, spoke the words the boy's known as the Marauder's had specified so many years ago, and opened it quickly to scour the piece of parchment with hungry eyes.

"Ana...Ana..." he murmured to himself as he rose to his feet, roaming the paper desperately for the name he needed to see. A moment passed. And then another. And another. Still no Ana. Harry felt his heart sinking to the pit of his stomach as he studied every inch of the Map over and over and over again...but it was no use. Ana wasn't there.

An exhalation of air he hadn't known he'd been holding escaped from him as he sank onto the edge of his bed. The Map fluttered to the ground as it slipped through his numb fingers, but Harry barely noticed. His plan had failed. He was no closer to finding Ana than he was before. And now he knew without a doubt that she was no longer in the castle. She could be anywhere...

He caught his head in his hands and leaned his elbows on his knees, shoulders slumped.

"Ana, where are you..." he whispered, closing his eyes. They were starting to burn...

Something soft brushed against his leg. Harry lifted his head from his hands and looked down, feeling his heart break at the sight. Goldie was circling his leg and staring up at him, hoping to get some affection. Harry forced a half-smile and lowered a hand to the cat's soft fur, petting her gently. But the smile faded almost as quickly as it had appeared. His mind wandered to dark places.

This had something to do with her parents. It had to. Harry could explain Ana's disappearance in no other way. But how had they gotten into the castle? Or perhaps it was just one of them. But that

was impossible...Hogwarts was encased in dozens of protection spells. But then who was this imposter pretending to be him...?

The sound of glass breaking rang out suddenly throughout the room and Harry shot from the bed, pointing his wand at the source of the noise. But his hand lowered as soon as he realized that Goldie was the culprit. The cat had climbed up onto his dresser and had knocked an inkpot to the floor where it now lay in pieces, the black liquid seeping through the cracks in the wooden floor. Goldie seemed very curious about Harry's Trick Tumbler, which glimmered in the light of the room. She batted at it experimentally, as though it would respond to her.

Harry stared blankly at this before shaking himself out of his daze. He needed to get the hell out of there. He wasn't doing anyone any good by just standing around, moping. But just as he stepped forward and placed his hand on the doorknob, he froze. Slowly, he turned his head, his eyes finding the sight of the Trick Tumbler again, and without warning a flood of memories from many months ago surged through his mind.

You see this button here?... for emergency pranks only... just push the button and it will show you exactly where the person is at that very moment... It's the modern Marauder's Map of our age, Harry!

One by one, the words of Fred and George came to him, as though from some hazy dream. Harry remembered a trip to Diagon Alley...the visit to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes...and the little red button that had failed to work that day. Was it possible...could it be that it would work now?

Goldie mewed softly almost in disappointment as Harry reached out and grabbed the shiny Trick Tumbler. His hands trembled despite his efforts to stay calm. *Please work...please*, he thought, grimacing as his finger found the miniscule red button and pushed.

"Ana Brighton," he said clearly, though his voice was not as strong as it normally was. If this didn't work...

But there was no time to think of that as he waited anxiously for something—*anything*—to happen. For a few painful seconds, the

room was deathly still. The only sound Harry could hear was his own heart thundering inside his chest, the way it had been ever since he learned Ana was in trouble. His stare could have burned holes in the small, golden invention he held tightly in his sweaty hands. The Trick Tumbler, however, was silent and unmoving.

And as the seconds turned to minutes, his heart sank once more. Anger stemmed from his growing fear, and it was that which almost caused him to hurl the gleaming contraption into the wall. But once again Harry stilled as another thought came to him.

Could it work?

“Please work,” he whispered to himself, gripping the Trick Tumbler tight once more. And then Harry spoke his next words loud and clear. “Anabelle Carrows!”

The machine made a wonderful whirring sound almost immediately as Harry breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He snatched the parchment from where the Tumbler had just spit it out and greedily let his eyes take in the picture that was drawing itself onto the paper. As it became more detailed, everything Harry had suspected about why the Marauder's Map had not worked was confirmed.

“She’s not in the castle...” he murmured, still studying every inch of the parchment. This, of course, was something he had already learned, but something else had dawned on Harry now too.

He knew exactly where she was. He remembered the clearing as if from some dream. It was the one in which Hagrid had gone to feed Rocky all those months ago. The day he'd taken Harry into the forest with him. The day he'd found Ana.

And now I'll find you again.

And with not more than a second glance at the paper, Harry was out the door and running before the thin parchment had even hit the ground.

[illegible]

The entrance to Dumbledore's office came into view as Ron rounded the corner at a run, Hermione and Ginny not far behind. He reached the stone gargoyle and skidded to a halt.

"Lemon Drop!" he yelled, panting heavily.

Nothing happened.

Hermione caught up with Ron and looked at him incredulously. "Lemon Drop?" she asked, brows raised. "Honestly Ron, that's the best you could come up with?"

Ron's ears turned a rather mute shade of red. "Well, I don't know!" he said. "I suppose you know what the password is then?"

"No, but I know it's not the same as it was in *second year!*" Hermione retorted, crossing her arms.

Ginny, who could sense a fight between her brother and Hermione from a mile away, took action and cut in before Ron could reply and no doubt say something he'd regret later. He looked irate.

"Stop!" she said sharply. "Both of you just stop! Is this really the time? An argument is the last thing we need right now, don't you think?"

Ron muttered something under his breath, which Hermione chose to blithely ignore. "You're right," she said to Ginny with a sigh.

"Yeah, well, that still leaves us with the very small problem of not being able to get in, doesn't it?" Ron said, crossing his own arms as he frowned.

Hermione and Ginny said nothing to this. It appeared as though their plan only took them as far as the entrance to Dumbledore's office...not actually inside it.

"Right, well, come on then," Ron said as he turned to head back the way they had come, talking over his shoulder at them as he did. "I say we go find McGonagall. She'll—"

"Fudge Flies!"

Ron stopped abruptly and turned at this odd interruption. "Huh?" he asked.

It only took him a moment to discover that Hermione had been the one to say the words, but she was paying neither him nor Ginny any attention. Instead, she was standing directly in front of the stone gargoyle and looking at it rather intently.

"What are y—"

"Chocolate Frogs!" she said, interrupting him once again.

Ron's mouth fell open a bit. "Have you gone mad?"

"The password always has something to do with sweets!" she said exasperatedly, not bothering to turn to him.

"She's right..." Ginny said suddenly, as though just realizing this. Ron, however, didn't look quite as impressed.

"We're wasting time, it could be any—"

"Ron, the only one who can help us is Dumbledore," Hermione said, cutting him short for the third time. She turned to face him fully, her face set and determined. A look Ron knew all too well. "We don't have time to go searching for McGonagall. You know she patrols at night. There's no telling where she is. Now are you going to help or not?"

"Fizzing Whizbee!" Ginny said clearly, stepping forward to stand beside Hermione. As the two girls shouted out random sweets, it dawned on Ron that he wasn't going to win this argument. So, with an obvious reluctance, he joined them and said anything that came to mind. Their voices sounded out clearly in the empty, candlelit hallway.

"Canary Creams!"

"Acid Pops!"

"Cockroach Clusters!"

“Licorice Wands!”

“Ice Mice!”

And with a suddenness that startled them all, the gargoyle leapt aside, revealing the staircase behind at Hermione’s last exclamation.

“We did it!” Ginny cried happily. Hermione beamed and Ron looked a bit surprised that it had actually worked.

“What did I tell you?” Hermione said, batting Ron’s shoulder with the back of her hand.

“Lucky guess,” Ron replied, failing very miserably at hiding the small smile that crept across his face.

The three wasted no time in stepping forward and allowing the staircase to lift them upward. Hermione reached the door first and gave it a sharp rap.

“Professor Dumbledore!” she said. “Professor Dumbledore, it’s Hermione, Ron and Ginny and we need your help, sir!”

But there was no answer.

“Well that’s bloody brilliant. He isn’t even here.” Ron scowled at the door in front of him. Hermione looked crestfallen. “So what now?” Ron asked.

Hermione opened her mouth to respond but before she could speak a word, a loud rattling sound interrupted her. She and Ron turned to see Ginny trying to open the door. Ron’s eyes widened and he grabbed his sister’s arm and pulled her away from the entrance.

“Are you *insane*?” he cried. “It’s locked, you can’t just walk into Dumbledore’s office when he isn’t even here!”

Ginny wrenched her arm away. “Yeah, I realize it’s locked Ron. Which is why I was just about to *unlock* it.”

“*What?! Gin—*”

But before he could stop her, she had pointed her wand at the handle and said, "*Alohomora!*"

The door clicked open and swung inward an inch. Ron stared at it in shock, but his look only intensified when Ginny waltzed into the office like she owned the place. Hermione bit her lip before following, albeit semi-reluctantly. Ron had no choice but to do the same, though that did not erase the fact that he was extremely nervous about being in Dumbledore's office past curfew when the man wasn't even there.

"All right, are you happy now?" he asked Ginny, who was looking around the room as though she expected Dumbledore to come out from behind the curtains and yell 'surprise!'

"He isn't here. Now can we *please* go find McGonagall before we get sentenced to Azkaban for breaking and entering?" Ron said, rather desperately. Ginny ignored him and instead turned to look at Hermione. Ron noted the significant glance she cast at the fireplace and grew even more nervous when the two girls began speaking in murmured tones. He only managed to catch snatches of their conversation.

"Do you think...?"

"Well, if it's our last..."

"He can help if..."

"...good idea..."

Finally he couldn't take it anymore. "OI! Would you two stop conspiring and tell me what the bloody hell is going on?"

Ginny faced him and said very bluntly, "We're going to Grimmauld Place."

Ron blanched. He seemed momentarily unable to speak.

"I know under normal circumstances it would be a ridiculous idea, Ron, but these *aren't* normal circumstances, are they?" Hermione said. She closed the distance between them, taking one of his hands

in her own. "It's the fastest way to get a hold of someone who can help us. Sirius might be able to tell us where Dumbledore is. Who knows? Dumbledore himself might even be there..."

"Yeah, but...but..." Ron sputtered, but he could not find the words to finish the sentence.

"Ron, for Merlin's sake, stop being such a twit!" Ginny cried, giving him a hard glance before moving to the fireplace and taking a handful of Floo powder from a silver goblet atop it. "Did you forget that Harry's on his own right now? We have to help him too you know. What would he do if he were in your shoes?"

Ron, of course, knew exactly what Harry would do. Harry wouldn't think twice about going to Grimmauld Place. Harry, however, was just as insane as these two were apparently. Ron met Hermione's gaze and seeing the almost fearful look in them brought him crashing back down to what was happening. Harry had run off like a mad man. Ana was with some loon pretending to be Harry. Things couldn't really get much worse than they already appeared to be.

"You're right," he said quietly. "Okay, let's go. Just remember that I was the one opposed to this when we get expelled and put on trial, okay?" he said, only half-joking.

Ginny merely rolled her eyes and stepped into the fireplace, shouting her destination and disappearing in the green flames. Hermione did her best to give him a warm smile, but it was clear she was scared about all this too.

Ron watched her follow Ginny's lead, and he muttered something about how he was 'going to regret this' before he did the same. He came spiraling out into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place after a few dizzy moments through the Floo Network, but when he finally took in his surroundings he visibly paled and swallowed hard.

The kitchen was chock full of Order members. All of whom were currently staring in utter bewilderment at the three youths who had just tumbled through the fireplace. Dumbledore, who sat near the head of the table, rose immediately at their entrance. Most of the others, including Sirius and Remus, simply stared wide-eyed at them.

“Ron? Ginny?” a voice asked, sounding almost stunned. It did not take Ron long to spot his father, Arthur Weasley, rising from his seat at the long table. “What...what on *earth* are you three doing here?”

“Er...hi Dad,” Ron said stupidly, feeling his cheeks growing quite warm. Even Ginny seemed a bit abashed now that they were actually there. And in the midst of a meeting, no less...

“Told you this was a bad idea,” Ron muttered to her through clenched teeth.

“Dad...” Ginny said, ignoring Ron and stepping forward. “Professor Dumbledore...we...we only came because it’s urgent. We think Ana’s in trouble...”

“And Harry might be too,” Hermione added quickly.

“*What?*” Sirius blurted, shooting up from his seated position and nearly knocking his chair over in the process. And as though a switch had been turned on, the room erupted into a loud commotion.

“Silence!” Dumbledore cried, and the noise stopped almost as quickly as it had started. Ron, Hermione and Ginny all looked extremely uncomfortable, but Dumbledore directed his next words to them all. “Now, tell me everything that has happened,” he said, quite calmly.

The three youths couldn’t explain fast enough. They told the group their story, starting from where Ginny had seen Ana with the fake Harry up to when Harry had separated from them even when they told him not to (Sirius cursed under his breath at this), and finally ended with their need to find someone who could help them, explaining why they had come here (though conveniently leaving out the part about breaking into Dumbledore’s own office). But it was clear to them all that breaking into private areas was the least of their worries, for Dumbledore did not mention it although he surely must have known what they had done.

“And now we’re here,” Hermione finished, somewhat feebly.

But Ginny added, “We think it has something to do with her parents, sir. The...the Carrows.”

"I see," Dumbledore said softly. He was silent for a moment, seemingly deep in thought. An anxious energy had taken over the room at the mention of the elusive Death Eaters. Many Order members already had their wands out and were looking to Dumbledore to give them the go ahead. Finally the old wizard nodded, and his own wand appeared in his hand.

"The castle. We shall need to search it. Though I'm almost certain she has since been taken outside of it by now," he said. Ron could have sworn there was a tone of sadness in his low voice. People were already hurrying past Ron, Hermione and Ginny and disappearing into the fireplace.

Dumbledore turned to Remus and placed a hand upon his shoulder. "The grounds, Remus. Take them there. The forest, in particular. It is my belief that they would not have strayed far from the castle itself. I shall fetch Minerva and meet up with you."

Ron barely saw Remus nod before Arthur hurried over to the three youths, who still stood near the fireplace, looking unsure about what to do next.

"Are you three all right? Thank Merlin your mother isn't here," he said to Ron and Ginny. "She'd have an absolute fit..."

"We're fine," Ron said. Hermione and Ginny quickly nodded in agreement.

"We're just worried about Ana and Harry, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said, grasping her hands together to keep them from shaking.

"Harry and Ana will both be all right," Remus cut in as he approached the group. Dumbledore and most of the other members of the Order had already left. "You three did the right thing in coming here." He gave them a small smile before turning to leave out the fireplace, but halted when he noticed Sirius was right behind him.

"What are you—" he began, but Sirius cut him off sharply.

"Hello Anabelle."

Ana's heavy breathing hitched in her throat as she gazed up into the cold eyes of her father. All of her dreams...her nightmares...every one of them had contained this moment. A smile crept across his face slowly, but there was nothing kind or welcoming about it. When Ana saw that smile, her heart sank to the pit of her stomach, and she felt her body begin to tremble despite her efforts to stop it.

"My, it's been such a long time since we saw our little girl," he said, never taking his dark gaze off of her. "We've missed you so much, Anabelle darling. Haven't we sweetheart?"

Ana turned her eyes to the side where a lithe figure was stepping out of the shadows of the trees. Andromeda Carrows hadn't seemed to hear him. Or perhaps she was ignoring Alecto's question. Instead she moved to the fallen body of Mundungus, staring down at it with disgust playing upon her pretty features before prodding the form with her foot.

"Despicable," she hissed. But it was not long before her steely gaze moved from the supine form to Alecto. "He's a member of that group. The Order. I thought you said the Malfoy boy was bringing her?" she said, looking slightly tense. Alecto, it seemed, didn't very much care *who* had brought Ana to them. He was gripping his wand tightly in his hand, barely sparing Andromeda a glance.

"I don't like this," she said softly. "This feels wrong. Something isn't right. Dumbledore heads that group. What if he's on his way here?" Her voice was growing shriller with each word. She kept shooting uncertain glances at the surrounding trees as though fearful that Dumbledore would step out from them at any moment.

"Quiet," Alecto said through clenched teeth. "What does it matter who brought her? She's here now." He studied Ana intently, his smile returning though it was clear that all he really wanted to do was scowl. "You're awfully quiet, Anabelle. Come now. Stand up. Let me have a look at you."

But Ana was still frozen in fear. By now the situation had sunk in. This was not one of her nightmares. This was very, very real. Her father

looked more menacing than she had ever remembered seeing him. Even with his wand held loosely in his hand at his side, he appeared more threatening to her than anything else ever had.

“Just kill her and be done with it!” Andromeda snapped. She had not once looked at Ana or addressed her. It was as though she had never been her daughter at all. As though Ana was a stranger who had just happened to stumble upon them in the dark woods. Wrong place, wrong time.

“Do you want a repeat of last time?” she said, lip curling in distaste.

“She’s not going anywhere. Are you Anabelle?”

But it was not a question. Ana knew there was no chance of escape. They were stronger. More powerful. She would not elude death twice. The first time she’d been lucky, but there was no luck in the air this night.

“Stand up and face me,” her father said again, a harsh, threatening edge to his deep voice now.

Ana looked up through her strands of her dark, sweat-matted hair at the towering form of her father, and as though a switch had been turned on she realized what she had to do. There was nothing else left to do. She had to accept defeat, and accept it in a way that would make her Gryffindor roots proud. In a way that would make Harry proud...

She swallowed hard, willing her mind not to drift to the dark haired, green-eyed boy. She’d fall apart at the realization that she’d never see him again. And she couldn’t fall apart. Not anymore.

And so, Ana lifted herself off the ground, ignoring the protest of her shaking limbs. She would not die afraid. Her eyes met her father’s with a determination and fire that most likely caused his slight look of surprise. She was not the same girl she had been when she had left them. Her back straightened as she stood before him, as proudly as she could muster. Her torn robes fluttered slightly in the soft wind that whispered through the trees.

If Alecto had indeed felt a stirring of surprise at Ana's sudden transformation, no trace of it lingered. The usual sneer marked his face now.

"Our little angel has been a busy girl when she was away, hasn't she..." he said in a near whisper. Andromeda scowled from her spot a few feet away as Alecto began to circle Ana like a predator circling its prey. His eyes took in the sight of her muddy robes, halting abruptly when they came across the Gryffindor badge sewn proudly on its front.

"Hogwarts," he hissed quietly. Utter disgust and loathing were etched in every inch of his features. "How could I have been so blind?"

Ana said nothing. She would not give him the satisfaction of getting an angry or defiant response to his hatred. She would not explode and tell him that Hogwarts had been more of a home to her than anything they'd ever provided. Not yet, at least...

"And what have they been teaching you at this poor excuse for a school, hmm?" he continued. "Does our little darling have her very own wand now? How adorable..."

Still, Ana said nothing. Though a muscle in her jaw was jumping and her nails dug into the soft, sweaty flesh of her palms now.

Alecto seemed to sense the tense waves coming off of her, for he smiled again. "I can't imagine you learned very much, though, with that fool of a Headmaster heading your education. Regrettable that such talent would be wasted in a broken down old hack of a man like him don't you agr—"

"He's not a hack!" Ana suddenly yelled. Her heart was racing with hot anger at her father's words. She could not keep silent any longer. "And he's more of a man than you could ever hope to be."

The silence that fell over the clearing was nearly deafening. Ana held her father's unreadable gaze, refusing to look away in her new state of resolve, but there was something troubling about the lack of reaction from him.

"I see he's fooled you with his lies too," he said finally. "I can't say I'm surprised. You always were a complete and utter disappointment." And even now he remained calm, saying the words matter-of-factly and as easily as though he were talking about the weather.

But words could no longer hurt Ana. Not from him. Her pulse slowed as the last of her anger washed away. The only thing left to replace it was hatred, and that was what laced her words as she spoke just as calmly as he had.

"The only fool here is you, *father*."

Alecto stilled for an instant, gave Ana a slow, humorless smile, and before she could even register what was happening, he had cried out a spell that struck her dead on.

"*Crucio!*"

Ana crumpled to the dirt floor the moment the jet of light hit her. Pain...unimaginable pain coursed like liquid fire through her veins, burning her insides until she could not form a coherent thought besides the wish to be killed so that the torture would end. Her nails dug into the earth as wave upon wave of agony wracked her body. She heard someone screaming and vaguely registered that it was her own voice she was hearing.

Hours seemed to pass before it finally subsided. When she was strong enough to open her eyes, she could just barely make out the form of her father towering over her once more through her blurry vision. She could not move. Her limbs felt stiff and unyielding after the intense pressure they'd just been through of trying to withstand the pain.

"You dare call *me* a fool?" he said, nearly seething with anger. "When will you learn, Anabelle? When will you learn that what you're standing up for is nothing but a sham? A weak, pitiful attempt to delay the inevitable reign of our Lord?"

Ana said nothing. Her breathing was ragged. She was trying to gather her strength again, but lay helpless upon the clearing floor as her father continued his tirade.

"You think Dumbledore will save you?" he asked, laughing slightly. His eyes held something manic. "You think he'll be able to defeat us? Defeat the Dark Lord himself? I think it's *you* who are the fool, daughter. Not even his so called 'weapon'...the *Potter boy*," he said, spitting out Harry's name like something venomous, "will stop us. He'll die a slow death at the hands of my Lord—"

"NO!"

Ana's involuntary cry rang out through the night air and stilled the two adults before her. Time itself seemed to stop in that moment. Ana realized her mistake immediately.

Her heart was in that cry.

And though she tried to hide the sudden swell of emotion that rose like a wave within her, she knew she had failed at the look on her mother's face. Andromeda studied her daughter with a dark intensity, a dawning recognition beginning to sweep across her features.

"She knows him..." she whispered. Alecto turned and watched as his wife took a step closer to the fallen Ana. Her gaze was sharp. Ana found she could not meet her mother's eyes.

"You do, don't you?" Andromeda continued. "You know the Potter boy. He goes to school here, does he not?"

Ana said nothing. She almost wished they would fire curses at her. Get it over with instead of toying like this. Instead of asking questions about Harry that she would never in a million years answer...no matter what they did to her. The intensity of her mother's stare frightened her. She looked hungry as she said Harry's name. It made Ana's stomach churn.

"So what if he does?" Alecto cut in. He looked a bit put off that he'd been interrupted mid-speech. Andromeda turned to glower at him.

"You fool. She can bring him to us, don't you see? She obviously has spoken to him before. May even be friends with him! Think of how the Dark Lord will reward us if we deliver him the boy..." she said eagerly. Alecto seemed prepared to argue but paused to take in this proposal.

Ana was trying to push herself up from the ground when he turned back to her.

"Is it true then?" he asked sharply. "You know Potter?"

The wind swept the hair from Ana's eyes, giving her a clear image of her father in the light of the moon. She was glad for it. That meant he could see her just as well. She wanted that for what she was about to say next. For what could be her last words on this earth.

"I'm not telling you anything," she said quietly, though her voice was steady. "And I'm not helping you get Harry. You'll have to kill me before I do anything to help you or your so called Lord, because I'd rather die than live in a world that knows nothing of light."

Alecto looked furious at this impudent reply. Andromeda, however, saw the determined look in Ana's eyes and merely gave a humorless smile.

"Very well, Anabelle," she said softly. "Alecto, do it now. We're finished here."

"Gladly," he spat. Ana did not flinch as he raised his wand toward her. She appeared calm on the outside, though her heart thundered a steady staccato inside her chest. It was then she realized that her only regret was never getting to see Harry one last time. She'd never get to say goodbye to him now.

"Goodbye Anabelle," her father said, though there was nothing sad or regretful about it.

But before he could utter a single syllable, a voice from behind cut him short. It was a voice that made Ana's heart soar and crumble all at once.

"Get away from her!"

Harry...

Wands were drawn and stances taken in a flurry of motion. But no spells were fired from the Carrows' wands as they took in the sight

before them, shocked. Ana looked too, and it was the image of Harry standing boldly at the edge of the clearing, wand outstretched, that made the first tear fall from her eyes.

He looked every inch the hero she knew he was. But only Ana could see beyond that. The telltale signs that others may have missed...The sweat-matted mop of unruly hair, the heaving chest, the slight tremble of his wand hand...the distant fear in his eyes. But it was not fear for his own life. It was fear for hers.

Another tear escaped.

To anyone else, Harry would have merely looked furious. Savage. But in that instant, as though he'd sensed her penetrating stare, Harry's eyes met Ana's. And just like that they seemed to soften. To try and convey some meaning or connection that went unspoken. Ana shook her head, completely distraught by his appearance now that her mind had cleared. All she could think about was her nightmare.

"Harry..." she whispered, nearly inaudibly. Her tear-streaked face glowed in the moonlight, showcasing every inch of her grief and look of pleading. "No..." she said, unable to continue as her throat closed up.

Leave. Leave...get out of here. Go. Please go...

But even without words, Harry seemed to know what she was trying to say. The soft look vanished from his eyes as he turned them once more upon Alecto and Andromeda.

He wasn't going anywhere.

"Potter..." Alecto seemed unable to believe his eyes. It wasn't long before a sick sort of glee filled them. "What a coincidence. We were just speaking about you..."

"Let Ana go," Harry said darkly. "If it's me you want, then fine. But she doesn't need to be here."

“Ana?” Andromeda repeated, arching a brow. Her eyes moved to her daughter. “What did I tell you, Alecto. They’re close after all.”

“Indeed,” Alecto murmured. “Well, as touching as your proposal is, Potter, I’m afraid I can’t do as you ask. Anabelle and I have unfinished business, you see. It’s a family thing, I’m sure you understand...”

“Harry, please...” Ana tried again, weakly. “Please get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving, Ana,” Harry replied simply, never taking his eyes off Alecto.

“Enough of this,” Alecto spat, lip curling in disgust. “Don’t be a fool, boy. Have you any idea who we are? What we are capable of? You really think you can stop me from what I came here to do?” His voice had risen in volume. Anger and impatience laced each word. The manic look had returned to his stare once more. Harry only had one response to this.

“Yes.”

“Shame,” Alecto replied. “And here I’d heard you were fairly intelligent.” He smirked humorlessly, and Harry tensed as Alecto’s raised his wand toward him. He was ready to defend himself against the spell, whatever it was, but what he was *not* ready for was what Alecto did next.

A snarl had marred the man’s face as his hand drew back, but he turned his body at the very last second, his wand now pointing at Ana...

“*AVADA KED—*”

“NO!” Harry yelled. “*Stupefy!*”

The jet of red light grazed Alecto’s shoulder, the force of which great enough to knock him down. The action spurred everyone into sudden movement. Ana was on her feet now, looking on horrified as Andromeda shrieked in fury and shot a spell straight at Harry, who dodged it just in time.

“Ana, get out of here!” he yelled before pointing his wand at Andromeda. “*Expelliarmus!*” But the spell was deflected easily.

Ana watched, unable and unwilling to do as Harry commanded, frozen still as jets of light lit up the clearing as Harry and her mother battled fiercely. Alecto was already lifting himself up from the ground, looking more furious than Ana had ever seen him. She had to do something. Harry was struggling to keep up with Andromeda’s spells...he’d never be able to take both of her parents on alone. She had to do something...

But what? She didn’t have a weapon. Draco had taken her wand from her in the bathroom. Without a wand—

But something out of the corner of Ana’s vision made her turn.

Mundungus...he was still lying there...she had to remind herself that he was indeed dead. There’d been something terrible about how quickly his life had ended. Just seeing his body made Ana shudder. But it also made her realize that he’d had his wand on him, and now she had her means of helping Harry.

Alecto had joined the battle by the time Ana wrested the wand from Mundungus’ clenched hand. Her parents were not giving Harry much time to think, let alone fire an attack on them. He was left with nothing to do but defend himself and deflect and dodge the curses that came his way, moving as agilely as Ana had seen him move that day in the abandoned classroom where he’d been sword fighting with Sirius. But this was not the time for reminiscence...

“You can’t beat us, Potter!” Ana heard her father yell. Harry dove to the earth to evade the stunning spell Alecto had just cast at him, and so he did not see that Andromeda was at the perfect angle of attack. The woman had just opened her mouth to make what would be the final blow when Ana realized what it was she had to do.

“*Reduc—*”

“*EXPELLIARMUS!*”

Andromeda's look of utter shock as her wand flew out of her hand to land some feet away was almost comical. Ana's hand was steady, her eyes filled with a new fire as she stared defiantly at her mother. And for a moment, all movement stopped. But Andromeda's surprise did not last long.

"Finish with the boy, Alecto," she said quietly. "Our daughter is mine..."

Harry watched helplessly as Andromeda walked calmly toward Ana, but there was no time to think about how he could possibly help her. Alecto had already started firing spells again...Ana would have to do this on her own.

"My little angel with a wand," Andromeda said, sickly sweet. "Did they teach you that at school? Come, let's see what else you can do, darling."

Ana's temper flared at her mother's mocking words. "*Stupefy!*" she yelled suddenly, but her aim was off. Andromeda had only to step to the side to avoid it. The older woman's laughter filled the clearing in a horrible echo.

"Predictably pathetic. Can't say I'm surprised. You always *were* such a disappointment, Anabelle," she said. Ana tried not to let the words sting her. She was much more concerned by the fact that Andromeda was slowly moving towards the place where her wand lay. "All those years..." she continued. "What a waste you were. Crying about those filthy Muggles. About that man...what was his name? Brennon?"

"Brighton," Ana said harshly. A few tears spilled once more down her pale cheeks despite her efforts to stop them.

"Ah, yes," Andromeda smirked. "Him. A shame you never got to see how pitifully he fought back. Wouldn't really call it a fight at all, actually..."

"Stop it!" Ana's hand began to shake. Anger and fear filled every inch of her now. Distantly, she heard her father and Harry battling behind her.

“He was a fool. Just like Dumbledore. Just like *you*.”

“No!” Ana cried. “You’re wrong.”

Andromeda’s eyes flicked to the battle between Harry and Alecto then. Both were firing curses, oblivious to anything else around them. She smiled before turning back to Ana. “I suppose you think the boy will save you then. He won’t. The Dark Lord will reward us beyond our wildest dreams for bringing him in, did you know that? And then Potter will die. A sorry death, just like his parents. Now drop the wand like a good girl and give up before you do something silly.”

“Never,” Ana said, her voice seething. “You’ll never—”

But it was in that moment that Andromeda dove for her wand, catching Ana off-guard. She fired a stunning spell to stop her but her mother was faster and far more experienced. Once the older woman had her wand she wasted no time in attacking. The spell struck Ana and sent her flying backwards where she fell hard upon the unyielding earth floor.

“Ana!” she heard Harry yell.

But Alecto took advantage of Harry’s momentary distraction, firing a curse that propelled him backwards as well, hitting his back hard against a tree. Ana did not have time to see whether or not he was all right, for her mother had once again raised her wand to strike. She rolled quickly to the side, missing the spell by mere inches. Pulling her aching body to her feet, she tried to remember everything she’d been taught.

“Impedimenta!”

But again, her mother deflected the spell. “Stop embarrassing yourself, Anabelle,” she said. A sneer marred her lips as she began to look almost bored by Ana’s refusal to give up. “You cannot beat me.”

Ana grit her teeth together. “I already have.” And just as Andromeda began to laugh again, Ana raised her wand...

“Reducto!”

The spell flew far above her mother’s head, and for a moment the patronizing smirk on Andromeda’s face held steady...until a loud crack echoed through the clearing. A large tree branch fell swiftly from directly above her, and the older woman barely had time to shriek let alone dodge the heavy branch. It fell upon her, knocking her hard upon the ground and pinning her to the surface.

Ana had hit her mark.

xxxxxxxxxxxx

Harry collided with the tree and a sharp pain exploded in the back of his head, blurring his vision. The last thing he’d seen was Ana collapsing to the ground after being hit by a spell. But looking over now showed him she was all right...standing again and fighting.

Thank Merlin...

“Had enough, Potter?”

Harry turned his eyes towards Alecto’s venomous voice and saw the man sneering down at him. With some effort, he pulled himself up from the ground and faced him.

“Hardly,” he replied.

“If you were wise, you would have never come here, boy,” Alecto said. They began to circle each other again, slowly. “The girl can’t possibly mean anything to you, pathetic as she is...”

“Girl?” Harry said, a note of disbelief evident in his voice. “You talk as though she weren’t your daughter. Your own flesh and blood—”

“She is no daughter of mine,” Alecto hissed. “And make no mistake about it, she will die tonight. I’ll finish what I came to do...”

“Like hell you will,” Harry growled. His eyes darkened as his hand gripped his wand harder. “You’re never hurting her again.”

“Touching. Incredibly false...but touching, Potter.” Alecto stopped his movements and glared at the Boy Who Lived. “You shouldn’t be so upset you know. You’ll be joining her soon.”

Harry’s anger flared, and the curse that came from him was almost involuntary it happened so quickly.

“Confringo!”

Alecto leapt to the side, barely missing the jet of light that whooshed past him. Harry raised his wand to fire again when a loud crack stopped him short. Both he and Alecto turned and watched in awe as the branch Andromeda stood beneath fell with a crash atop her.

Harry’s eyes flew to Ana’s, who looked battle-worthy in the dim clearing, her hair blowing around her in the soft wind, wand held steadily in front of her. Harry had never felt more proud of her than in that moment. He smiled softly, and for one, glorious second they connected, for she smiled too and it was as though this were any other time or place...as though they weren’t in a dark clearing of the forest with two of the most dangerous Death Eaters in existence...as though there was no one else in the world but the two of them.

But that one second was all Alecto needed.

The spell shot from his wand at what almost seemed to be slow motion. Harry could do nothing but stare in utter terror as it struck Ana dead on. She seemed surprised by the blow, and for a moment stood there in the moonlight, suspended and held in place before her knees crumpled beneath her and she was falling...

“ANA!”

Harry ran, barely catching her before she hit the ground. His knees hit the earth as his arms wrapped around her limp form lying like a rag doll on his lap. Harry felt something warm and wet on his hands and all breath was taken from his lungs as he looked down and realized what it was.

Blood. Ana’s blood.

“No...” he breathed. Her robes were turning darker in the soft glow that lit the clearing. Harry could not see the wound but knew it had to be bad if the blood was soaking the material as quickly as it was. “No, no, no...”

Alecto’s cry of triumph reached his ears and Harry turned savage eyes in the man’s direction. The stunning spell that shot from Harry’s wand was faster and more powerful than any he’d ever fired before. So fast that the ghost of Alecto’s sick look of glee lingered upon his face even as he hit the ground with a thud. Harry hardly noticed.

“Harry...” Her voice was small. Nearly inaudible.

“Shh...it’s...it’s gonna be okay, Ana,” Harry said. His voice shook as his hands tried to stem the flow of the lifeblood pouring out of her. His mind was spinning, trying to figure out what the spell had been...a cutting one of some sort...one he’d never seen before...did he know any healing spells? Why couldn’t he think of a single one?

*Damn it! Come on, Potter, **think**...*

“Harry...I did good in my...in my I-lesson tonight...”

Harry’s eyes stung at her weak words, and he tore his stare away from her injury to meet her gaze. His heart almost stopped completely at the sight of the soft smile on her face. It was an odd thing to say. But nothing else could have made his heart twist as painfully. He had to wait a moment before he was certain his voice would not fail him.

“That’s great, love,” he whispered. “I’m...I’m so proud of you.”

Ana’s smile faltered and a grimace of pain replaced it briefly. “I’m sorry for...for causing all this trouble.”

Harry choked back a sob. “No. No, don’t you dare say that. You didn’t...this wasn’t...”

But Harry was steadily losing his ability to speak coherently. Ana’s breathing was becoming more and more shallow. Harry had never felt more helpless or frightened in his entire life. He had to strain to hear her next words.

"Thank you..."

"For what?" he asked, voice cracking.

"For coming...you...you shouldn't have though."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I came," he said firmly, tearing his eyes from hers to once more look at her wound. His hands were covered in blood...panic was seizing him.

"Merlin, Ana, what do I do..." he whispered. "What do I do?"

He contemplated moving her. But even the simple act of breathing itself seemed to put her in agony. Would she survive the trip back to the castle?

"You're okay," she said, making his brows knit together in confusion. "As long as...you...they killed you..."

"What?" Harry asked, growing more concerned. Ana's seemed to be fighting to stay conscious.

"My dream...you...and they...but it didn't happen...all that matters..."

"Ana..." Harry said, gripping her tighter as her eyes began to close. "Ana! No, stay with me okay? Ana!"

He shook her slightly, but her eyes had closed. She did not respond to his desperate pleas. Tears streamed down his face unabated now...and still he continued to try and wake her, refusing to believe the worst.

Distantly it registered that there was movement on all sides of him. Shouts and the sound of shuffling feet filled the clearing as Order members surrounded the scene. Alecto was being carted off and the branch was being lifted from Andromeda. Mundungus' pulse was being checked and the area being searched. Figures approached him, but Harry was oblivious to it all. The only thing he saw was the limp girl in his arms and the need to get her to open her eyes again...

And when her shallow breaths seemed to slow to a stop, all movement halted as a strangled cry ripped from Harry's throat. The Order members resembled ghosts in the wispy light that illuminated the clearing in its glow...each one had stopped what they were doing to stare at the young man clutching the bloodied girl's form in his arms. No one said a word. The only sound that night was Harry's voice crying out Ana's name as he rocked her back and forth.

But the spell was broken as Sirius stepped forward, laying a gentle hand on Harry's shaking shoulder.

"Harry...Harry, son, we need to get her to the Hospital Wing..." Sirius said. When Harry did not respond or even acknowledge that he'd heard his godfather at all, Sirius tried again. "Harry, she needs help. There's a chance we can still help her."

Remus appeared at their side and gave Sirius a dark look once he'd seen Ana's battered condition. The look told a tale...one that every individual in the clearing could have easily spoken aloud. And as Harry's red, tear-filled eyes stared down at the girl who'd stolen his heart and saved him from loneliness, only one thought plagued his mind, digging into it like a disease that spreads and sucks away life as it goes.

But I couldn't save her...I couldn't save her...I couldn't save her...

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AN: I don't really know where to begin. I suppose I need to say first and foremost that I am sorry. Truly and deeply sorry that it has taken me this long to update this story. For those of you who weren't aware, my computer was stolen way back in February. It had the very nearly finished version of this chapter on it, and I hadn't saved it anywhere else. So it was gone, every word of it, and I was utterly and completely heartbroken to say the very least. It had all of my writing on it, not just for Runaway, so it was a hard blow.

Soon after, I lost the will to write. I was so disgusted by what had happened that every time I attempted to rewrite this chapter I deleted it and gave up. I was extremely happy with the original version. And

those of you who know me, know that I'm not usually quick to say that about my own writing. And those of you who are writers as well most likely know how hard it is to recreate something that you actually felt great about the first time. It never quite comes out the same way.

And so, I can say with all honesty that I know this chapter is lacking in many ways. I'm not thrilled with it. So I'm sorry if I've fallen short of expectations. Please know I'm not fishing for compliments here...this is how I truly feel. But I knew that I couldn't not finish this story or keep my readers waiting any longer than I already had. I owe all of you so much. Words will never be enough to express my gratitude to you. I read your supportive comments and each one of them made me cry. It meant the world to me, and always will, that you've taken the time to read this story and come along with me as I told it. Yes, this is just a fanfic. But this story has brought me friends, and laughter, and tears, and inspiration. I wouldn't trade a second of it for the whole world.

So if you are reading this right now, these words, I want to thank you. You will never know how much it means to me. I'm so very, very sorry for keeping you waiting. I know you don't deserve it. And I can assure you that the next one (yes, there is a next one) will not take nearly as long. I promise. Thanks again guys. You really are the best. All of you.

Scrib

[illegible]

Chapter 21

Whispers. Broken murmurings of uncertainty and sadness.

Harry was only distantly aware of his surroundings. His heart felt like it was trying to burst from his chest. It went beyond pain, what he was feeling. Beyond sorrow...beyond anguish. Harry didn't really feel *anything*. If it was possible to be dead and still breathing at the same time, then that would be the closest way to describe his state as he sat in the chair next to Ana's unresponsive form.

His eyes, dulled to a mossy green, were glued to her stomach. It lifted almost imperceptibly with each small breath she took. He refused to look away from her, fearing that if he did so, he'd return his gaze to find that her chest no longer lifted and fell.

This was hell, and he was in it.

He hadn't moved an inch...nor did he intend to. Pomfrey's insistence was not enough to convince Harry to leave her. Not even Dumbledore himself could keep Harry away...though the older wizard hadn't exactly tried. Somehow Harry knew that the Headmaster understood that he needed to be with her. That it would be useless to talk him out of his vigilant guard next to her bed in the gloomy Hospital wing.

Never mind the fact that Harry hadn't spoken a word since he'd arrived with a limp and unresponsive Ana in his arms. He hadn't allowed anyone else near her. Sirius had been the only one who was able to convince Harry to even step away from her long enough so that Madam Pomfrey could do her work.

But that had been hours ago. Now...now here he was, hunched forward, eyes staring dully onto Ana's form. Dried tears made Harry's cheeks feel stiff. His heart lurched and his stomach turned again.

She was just so pale...she was hardly there at all.

Like a ghost she lay there on the bed, rivaling the starched sheets in whiteness. Again, whispers carried over to him. He had lost his ability

to care about anything, he felt so numb. But he found himself listening all the same.

“...I can’t guarantee anything, Albus.” Pomfrey’s harried voice whispered. “Even if she survived the trip to St. Mungo’s, I doubt they’d be able to do anything I haven’t already done. She’s just lost so much blood...”

“I understand, Poppy.”

“Albus, the young man...he needs to be looked at. Just look at him! Looks like death himself, not to mention how he’s been acting. Bursting in here like some barbarian, covered in blood. And now he won’t listen to a word I say, not a word! I think I at least need to give him some sleeping potion...hasn’t moved an inch—”

Harry tuned out, blocking the hushed sounds from his consciousness, not caring what else the nurse had to say. He’d heard it already anyways.

Sleeping potion. The idea was almost humorous it was so ridiculous. As if something like sleep mattered to him at this moment. Besides, it wasn’t as if succumbing to his exhaustion—both mental and physical—would provide an escape from the hell he was currently suffering. The nightmares he would almost certainly have would most likely be even worse than sitting there next to Ana’s pallid form. At least now, when he was awake, he could consciously keep the image of her being struck by the spell in the forest from his mind. He could push away the memory of how she’d seem to fall to the hard earth below in slow motion...how the cry of pain had ripped from his lungs when her eyes finally closed...lock it up in the deepest corners of his mind and throw away the key.

Never...*never*...did he want to relive those memories again. The thought alone of how frail Ana had felt in his arms and how helpless he’d felt as her warm blood poured out of her made his chest feel like it was caving inwards, crushing his heart and lungs until he no longer could breathe. It was a Herculean effort, keeping those thoughts at bay, but Harry had to do it. He had to do it for the sake of his sanity. But, more importantly, he had to do it for Ana. He had to be here for her, both in body and mind...even if she was incapable of knowing

that. If he lost it now he wasn't sure if he'd be strong enough to recover again. Falling apart was not an option. No matter how alluring it seemed on the surface.

"Harry?"

The gentle voice broke through the thick haze of his dark thoughts, and he glanced up when a hand fell upon his shoulder. Professor Dumbledore stared down at him, his spectacles catching the soft light of the moon that shown through the nearest window. His features were composed...if not a bit tired. Dumbledore seemed to be looking more and more tired recently. Harry would have felt a twinge of concern were he capable of breaking through the numbness that currently had a hold of him. Instead, he stared up at the older man bleakly, not bothering to try and hide the emptiness in his eyes. Dumbledore would see right through that anyways.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry said tonelessly. His voice sounded strange to his own ears. Unrecognizable.

Dumbledore must have heard it too, for something flickered through his gaze for an instant. Remorse? Whatever it was, it was gone before Harry could accurately identify it. Suddenly the Headmaster's eyes were warm and comforting. But the usual sparkle was nowhere to be seen. A fact that did not go unnoticed by Harry.

"Would you be so kind as to take a walk with me?" Dumbledore asked, his voice soft and kind. "There are a few things I would like to discuss with you."

Immediately, Harry tensed. His hands clenched into fists and his heart seemed to speed up. He opened his mouth to refuse but Dumbledore cut him off before he could.

"We won't go far," he reassured quickly, his voice certain and honest. "She'll still be here when you return, Harry."

Harry wasn't sure how to respond to this and for a moment he felt a stirring of indecision. A small movement to the side interrupted his thoughts and he saw Pomfrey hovering nearby, looking impatient and

slightly agitated. She most likely needed to look at Ana again. He was in the way.

Uncertainty plagued his features, his jaw line taut as he stared at Ana. He felt a slight pressure on his shoulder and realized Dumbledore was waiting. He glanced up at him with hesitant eyes.

“Please,” Dumbledore said quietly.

The decision was made. Harry sighed as he rose to his feet reluctantly, shooting one last anxious glance at the girl in the hospital bed before following Dumbledore’s lead to the door. Pomfrey was with her. He’d only get in the way if he stayed while the nurse checked on Ana. Not that that made it any easier to leave her.

He worried his brow as he fell into a slow pace beside Dumbledore, barely even noticing when they exited the Hospital Wing. The sound of their footsteps echoed softly through the dim hallway. Harry watched the stone ground in front of him as flickers of light from the torches danced across it.

Finally, Harry seemed to notice the silence and looked up. Dumbledore was staring calmly ahead, hands clasped behind his back as his steps took him slowly forward. Harry was suddenly curious as to why Dumbledore had wanted to speak with him in the first place.

Dumbledore didn’t seem to notice Harry’s searching glance. Instead, he continued onward in silence until they were just about to pass one of the many paintings lining the wall. They’d passed all the other ones by, but Dumbledore paused in front of this one for some reason. Harry slowed to a stop and followed Dumbledore’s gaze to the artwork, trying to make sense of the dark shapes upon it in the dim light.

Almost immediately something struck Harry as odd about the painting. Peering closer, Harry finally realized what it was.

The picture was...*still*.

Harry wondered briefly if this was a non-magical painting. One that didn't have contents fluid with motion like most of the artwork adorning the halls of Hogwarts. But the longer he looked at it, the more he realized that no, this was not a Muggle painting. And this made the silence of the canvas that much more unnerving.

He also realized that the shadowy light of the hall wasn't entirely at fault for the murkiness and inscrutability of the picture. The painting *itself* was dark. Inky blacks, muddy browns, and gloomy greens all bled together to form a rather dismal scene. A forest. Deep within the heart of one, from the looks of it. Harry's eyes took in the stillness of the leaves and repressed a shudder. There was something sinister about the stillness. Something unnatural. He felt his skin crawl and not only because the setting of the painting reminded him painfully of what had just occurred not hours before in the forest surrounding Hogwarts.

But the most disturbing aspect of the picture, by far, was its central figure. A man...if you could call him that...sat in the center of the scene, his back against a towering tree. His head hung down over his body so that his long, mangy curtain of black hair covered any hope of catching a glimpse of his features. But something, instinct maybe, told Harry that he didn't *want* to see what the man looked like. The way his body slumped there...the position of his shoulders...the lack of movement...all of it told Harry enough about the man.

He looked...*defeated*. Or perhaps tortured was a better way to describe it. Utterly and completely hopeless. Harry tore his eyes from the anguished figure. It was hard to look at him for too long. His glance rose upward and at the very top of the scene was a faint, white glow. It took Harry a moment to realize the source of it. The moon. Its rays seemed to be desperately trying to shine through the dense canopy of the forest scene. They reached down through the leaves towards the man. Close enough to touch...

And yet even the light itself seemed sinister. The way it poured down from the tops of the trees, almost eagerly. Seeping its way downward and yet doing little to brighten the scene.

Harry shuddered again.

“Have you ever come across the name Ronan Grimoult throughout your studies here, Harry?”

Harry started at the sudden sound of Dumbledore’s voice, even though it was soft and low. Compared to the quietness of the hallway, it had caught him off-guard. He turned to stare at the older man, but Dumbledore’s eyes were still trained upon the painting before them. Harry thought about what he’d asked and frowned.

The name did sound vaguely familiar. Memories from what seemed like eons ago flitted across his consciousness. An open book...late night research for an essay...Snape’s harsh, clipped lecture, tinged with malice and something like satisfaction.

But it hadn’t been a Potions lecture. Which meant...

“Werewolves,” Harry finally murmured into the silence, staring hard at a space on the wall as he tried to concentrate. “Something about werewolves?” He turned once more to Dumbledore and this time he found the man staring back at him with a faint smile.

“Correct,” he said, nodding almost imperceptibly. His eyes traveled once more to the painting. “Ronan Grimoult was the earliest known case.”

Harry’s eyes followed Dumbledore’s. And suddenly they went wide with understanding. “Is that...?” he trailed off, staring at the immobile man on the canvas. Dumbledore nodded once, slowly. “So he was a...?” Harry continued, never taking his eyes off the figure. He saw Dumbledore nod once more out of the corner of his eye.

This put the painting into a whole new perspective. But just as Harry began to study it again through the lens of this newfound information, he paused, brows furrowing. Why was Dumbledore telling him this? What did it have to do with anything? Was he just trying to distract him from what had been plaguing his thoughts ever since he’d brought Ana to the Hospital Wing?

Harry’s frown deepened. If that was the case, then Dumbledore was fighting a losing battle. Nothing could make him forget what had happened that night. And just like that, his thoughts went to Ana. A

mixture of intense emotions sped through him as her face swam across his vision. Anger, sorrow, pain...guilt. If only he'd been fast enough. If only...

But a sigh from Dumbledore brought him back to the present. The Headmaster's voice, soft and even, followed the exhalation and Harry found himself listening despite his determination not to be distracted.

"Those were ancient times, Harry," Dumbledore began, his gaze distant. "People didn't understand then the different facets of beings and creatures as we understand them now. It's unclear how Ronan was turned. The information we have is succinct and sadly lacking in detail. There are many legends of course. The origin of the werewolf goes back thousands of years and varies from place to place...but I digress.

"The important thing to know is not who changed him...but what occurred *after* the change that led to what you see before you," he said, indicating the man in the painting with a nod. Harry found himself studying the form once again. And again he wondered why Dumbledore was bothering with all this.

"The story goes that Ronan was quite an ordinary, humble man. Living a quiet life with his wife and son. When he was...changed...well, you have to try and put yourself in his position to even try to begin to understand how utterly horrifying the ordeal was." Dumbledore's face was grim in the flickering light. "Keep in mind that Ronan was *not* a wizard. He knew nothing of our world...of the horrors that exist right alongside the wonders.

"To be a perfectly normal human being one moment, and a bloodthirsty monster the next...well...I suppose it would be unnecessary to explain the unpleasantness of that experience, " Dumbledore said, his words trailing off as his eyes filled with sadness.

Harry continued to stare at the huddled form in the picture and tried to imagine what it would be like, having a normal life be turned completely upside down. It turned out that he didn't have to try all that hard. He knew what it was like...being normal one second and anything *but* normal the next. But to be turned into—quite literally—a monster? 'Unpleasant' suddenly seemed like an understatement.

“Ronan’s life changed forever in that moment of his first transformation,” Dumbledore went on. The sadness in his features intensified, and Harry almost knew what his next words would be before he even spoke them.

“His wife and child did not survive the event.”

A silence fell over them both as Harry took in what he’d just been told. And now the defeat he saw in the huddled form on the canvas took on an entirely new meaning. The man had killed his family. The ones he’d loved were dead because of him. Harry’s mind wandered to dark places again. He thought of his parents...of Cedric...of his friends and loved ones here at Hogwarts who were in danger simply for knowing him. And again Ana came to the surface of those thoughts, making his hands clench into fists without him even realizing.

She wasn’t dead. But what if he lost yet another loved one when all was said and done? What if he lost her? The thought of it and what it would do to him was too unbearable to put into words.

“That’s awful,” Harry finally said, his voice low in the flickering corridor. He turned his eyes to the stone floor at his feet, unable to look at the painting anymore. “Look, it’s not that I don’t care, but why exactly are you telling me all this, Professor?” he asked dully.

“I am telling you this, Harry, because I do not want what happened to Ronan to happen to you,” Dumbledore replied as he turned to face him. Harry glanced up and met the Headmaster’s wise blue eyes and furrowed his brows.

“I’m not quite sure I understand, Sir...”

“This was not your fault, Harry.” Dumbledore’s countenance had turned suddenly serious. “And I’m not just talking about Ana.”

Harry said nothing but swallowed hard, tearing his eyes away from the man in front of him. But Dumbledore went on.

“Do you remember what I told Ana those many months ago? About guilt?”

"A strong emotion..." Harry murmured.

"That's right," Dumbledore said, nodding. "So strong that it has the power to overtake you completely...change who you are, inside and out." His eyes strayed to the huddled dark form on the canvas. "But there are—"

"Stronger things. Yeah, I know," Harry interrupted, his voice clipped. His jaw clenched and something inside him seemed to snap. All the feelings he'd been suppressing since Ana arrived at the Hospital wing suddenly came to the surface in a torrent of intensity.

"Look, you don't know anything, okay?" he said as he turned to face the older Wizard fully. "Don't try to tell me that things aren't my fault when I *know* they are. All of it is my fault. *I'm* the one Voldemort wants. *I'm* the one he's willing to sacrifice others for in order to get to. *I'm* the reason my parents and Cedric are dead. And more will die because of *me*. And now another person I...I I-love is..." He stopped as his rushed voice cracked with emotion. He was breathing heavily, trying to get himself under control.

"I wasn't strong enough," he finally said in a whisper. "I could have...I could have stopped him. I shouldn't have gotten distracted. I should have done anything I could to save her. I should have—"

"You *did*, Harry. You did all you could. More than anyone could have asked of you," Dumbledore said, finally breaking the silence he'd calmly held throughout Harry's tirade.

Harry shook his head in disgust and turned his eyes away, unable to stand looking at the man and see the pity in his eyes.

"It wasn't enough," he said tersely.

"Oh Harry..." he heard Dumbledore sigh, his voice uncharacteristically sorrowful. "I don't know how else to convince you that you are not at fault for any of this. If anything, the fault lies with me."

Harry looked up quickly, about to protest. "But—"

“No, no,” Dumbledore cut in, holding up a hand to stop him. “There’s no point in arguing now, is there? What’s done is done. I’m just...I’m so very sorry, Harry. No one should have to endure what you have had to throughout your short life thus far. If I could change things...” he stopped, his gaze moving towards the painting. The lines on his face seemed more deep and prominent somehow in the glow of the soft firelight. “Well...no matter.”

Dumbledore turned to face Harry once more and forced a small smile before placing a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Don't give up yet, Harry. I wasn't lying when I said there are stronger things than guilt." His eyes strayed towards the open door of the Hospital wing and Harry followed his gaze.

“Sometimes love can perform miracles. Like saving a life...” he trailed off, turning back to Harry with a knowing glint in his eyes. “Just...remember Ronan. He did not have anyone to help him, but *you* do. There are people who care deeply for you, Harry. People willing to listen if you’d only let them. A life in darkness is not a life at all. Remember that.”

Harry's heart gave a pang, but he nodded to show he'd heard what Dumbledore had said. "I hope you're right, Professor."

Dumbledore nodded as well, smiling slightly as he gave Harry's shoulder a last squeeze. Harry barely noticed the man's fading footsteps as he disappeared down the dim corridor. The only thing he could focus on was the hunched form of the man in the dark painting and how he appeared lifeless and empty beneath the nearing light of the moon. The werewolf did not stir once as long as Harry stood there. Unlike Remus, he didn't appear to fear the moonlight. It was as though he didn't fear anything...as though he'd stopped feeling anything at all. Harry closed his eyes, shutting out everything around him. Everything except a voice from within him that could not be silenced, no matter how hard he tried to.

A life in darkness is not a life at all...

[illegible]

She couldn't get out.

The velvety darkness encompassed her. There was no light. There was no sound. And there was no way out.

But did she even want to get out?

The darkness and how close it was felt good. Like relaxing deep underwater without feeling the desperate need for air. She wanted to sink deeper. As deep as she could go. There was something comforting about the nothingness. She felt nothing. No fear...no worry...no pain.

But there was something else there...something pulsing far beneath the surface of her and her surroundings. Something telling her the darkness wasn't as safe as it appeared to be. That this was all wrong. That she shouldn't be allowing herself to drift away without a fight.

But then the darkness would call to her again. So very enticingly.

Ana...

The haze suddenly seemed thinner somehow...did she know that voice?

Ana please...

She did. She did know it. But the fog was still too thick. She couldn't get a firm grip on anything...her mind refused to work. But suddenly she found that she wanted out. She wanted to get closer to the voice...but how?

There was no time in her dark new world. She could have been there for 5 minutes or 5 years. There was no way of knowing. But now there was a sense of urgency within her. She had to get out before it was too late. She had to get to the voice.

And that was when she felt it. The darkness was getting lighter. Indistinct shapes flitted across the haze. And then...

Pain. Throbbing pain. All over. She wanted to cry...to scream...to slink back into the darkness where it was warm and comforting. Yet with a nearly inhuman effort, Ana's eyes opened for the briefest of moments.

Her vision blurred, but she could just make out the shape of a woman hovering over her. She tried to speak but no words came. Her throat resisted her attempts to make a sound and let whoever was around know that she was there...awake. And just like in the darkness, she found she couldn't move. She was just so weak...

Therefore there was nothing she could do when the woman began walking away. The despair she felt at not being heard caused her to summon the last of her strength and whisper the one and only word that was clear and shining bright as a beacon in her mind.

"Harry..."

And then she saw no more. She was gone before the dark haired boy returned to his seat beside her. But somehow...*somehow* she felt it when his hand took her own. It gave her the strength to resist the urge to fall deeper into the nothingness. She had a battle to fight now. And now she remembered what she was fighting *for*. But the real question was...

...was it a battle she could win?

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AN: GAH! You guys, I am so SO sorry for taking so long to update again. I suck at life. First it was finals that I BARELY survived by the way, and then I got the flu for 2 weeks. :(And I'm STILL coughing. But yeah, enough excuses, I just want you to know that I'm very, very sorry. And this chapter is shorter than I would have liked it to be, and probably full of typos but I didnt want to keep you waiting even longer. Anyways, I hope you like it, even though I feel like it's way random. o.O And I know I said this last time, but the next one won't take as long hopefully. And it will be longer, for sure. And...stuff will happen. Great stuff. Awesome stuff.

Okay, now I'm just rambling. I hope all of you have wonderful holidays and a very happy New Year as well! As always, comments are greatly appreciated. :) Thanks for being so patient guys. Have I told you that you all rock recently? No? Well ya do. :D huge hugs

Scrib

Chapter 22

Green met gray.

Her laugh was like music as it rang out and mixed with the sound of the warm breeze rustling the leaves above them. The boy smiled and grabbed the girl's waist, hauling her into his lap. She laughed again, a bright, happy sound. A strand of dark hair blew into her eyes, and he reached up to gently brush it away.

It was a perfect moment. One that seemed too good to be true. Too wonderful to be anything other than a dream.

"I love you, Ana," the boy said.

The girl smiled, and it was like the sun.

"Love you too, Harry."

He pulled her closer and held her soft cheek in his hand. His eyes closed as his lips lowered to meet hers. Lower...lower...and then...

Nothing.

The space before him was empty. The only thing that remained was the echo of her laughter growing fainter and fainter, carried off by the wind.

She was gone.

Harry woke with a start, chest heaving in and out. It took him a moment to realize where he was and what had happened. The hospital wing was dim with the early morning light. He'd dozed off again.

Cursing softly, he lifted himself to a straighter sitting position in the stiff chair beside the bed, trying to ignore the way his muscles ached in protest. His eyes lit upon Ana immediately and something of a relieved sigh escaped his lips. He'd half expected to find the bed empty after his dream...

But she was there. She hadn't moved and nothing had changed. Harry clenched his jaw as another wave of sadness and remorse rushed through him.

"Harry!"

The voice cut through the silence of the room. Harry glanced up and saw Hermione rushing towards him with Ron close on her heels. Her face was alight, shining with something torn between relief and sadness. Harry didn't have much time to stand before her arms surrounded him, pulling him close as something wet dampened his shoulder.

"Don't cry," he told her softly. But his own eyes glistened and filled even as he spoke the quiet plea.

"Oh Harry," she breathed, pulling away and not bothering to hide the sorrow and pity in her gaze now. Harry said nothing. His eyes found Ron, but the other boy was staring at Ana, his features pulling down into an expression of muted disbelief.

"I'm so sorry, mate," he said finally, choking the words out and never once shifting his gaze from the hospital bed and the pale and broken girl upon it. "Is she...will she..."

But Ron couldn't seem to form the words. Harry turned his face away and stared unseeingly out the sunlit window.

"They don't know."

"Dumbledore told us what happened," Hermione said, breaking the stiff silence that had fallen with her soft and careful voice. "Those wretched people...their own daughter," she stopped, overcome with some emotion.

"Yeah, well, now they're off to Azkaban where they belong," Ron said gruffly. "Still can't believe Dung is dead though. Who knew he'd get it into his head to do something like that? I mean, I always knew he was barmy, but he really went off the deep end didn't he?"

Hermione sent him a reproachful glance.

“What?” Ron countered, unabashed. “It’s true...”

“I thought Malfoy’s involvement was more surprising, to be honest,” Hermione countered.

“What, him? Malfoy’s always been a slimy git!” Ron said, disbelief coloring his tone. “Only a matter of time before he followed in Daddy’s footsteps.”

Harry stiffened and turned. “What?”

“Slimy git or not, I still can’t believe he did it,” Hermione said. Neither her nor Ron seemed to have heard Harry.

“Well I can. Just wish I could have seen the look on his face when Dung blasted him. Best thing the ol’ codger ever did if you ask me.”

“Ron, *really*...”

“Stop!” Harry yelled. Both Ron and Hermione turned away from each other to stare at him in surprise. “What are you talking about?” he asked once he knew he had their attention. His posture was tense and his face hard.

Hermione’s brow furrowed. “You...Harry, you don’t know?”

He bit back a growl of frustration. “Obviously I don’t.”

“Dumbledore didn’t tell you?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head curtly. “We talked about...other things.” He swallowed and pushed those memories aside for now. It wasn’t something he wanted to discuss at the moment. Instead he fixed his hard gaze on his two best friends. “Just tell me about Malfoy. What does he have to do with this?”

“He was the one who used the Polyjuice, Harry,” Hermione told him gently.

Harry’s breath hitched. He stared at her as though he didn’t really comprehend what she’d just told him.

“Yeah, they found him unconscious near the Great Hall. Dung did it,” Ron added.

All was silent in the room for one suspended moment. And then Harry snapped.

“I’m going to *kill* him!” he surged towards the door, stopped only when Ron grabbed him. “Let *go*!” He struggled in his friend’s grip, breathing hard and seeing red.

“Harry!” Hermione said, wide-eyed and alarmed.

“Mate, stop,” Ron managed to say, though he was having a hell of a time trying to keep Harry still. “For Merlin’s sake, would you cut it...ow!” He winced when an elbow jabbed into his ribs, but Ron miraculously kept his hold strong. Hermione moved into action, placing herself between Harry and the door.

“Harry, listen, what Malfoy did was awful—“

“Awful?” Harry cut in incredulously. “She wouldn’t be half *dead* if it wasn’t for him!”

“*Worse* than awful,” Hermione corrected. “And believe me, he’s going to get what’s coming to him. But there’s nothing you can *do* now. I know you’re angry, but you can’t go rushing off and get yourself thrown into Azkaban on murder charges. Do you really think Ana would want that?”

The question was what finally halted Harry’s struggles. He stilled, breathing heavily and looking towards the ground as his anger slowly ebbed away, barely noticing when Ron released him and Hermione let out a barely audible sigh of relief. All he could do was turn away from them both and head back to the chair beside Ana’s bed, sinking into it and looking half dead himself.

“You’re right,” he said finally. Lifelessly. If he had been capable of paying attention, he would have seen the worried glance his friends exchanged. The silence that fell was tense, and Harry was the one who finally broke it.

"I can't lose her," he said, in a voice that was just barely a whisper. "If I lose her it means I really am cursed. Everything I love will always be taken away from me. Always." His hands turned to fists on the arms of the chair. "What's the point of being good. Noble. *Brave*. None of those things helped me save her." His tone was bitter now. Disgusted. "Maybe the Sorting Hat was right. Maybe I should have been in Slytherin. All this time."

"Harry, how can you say that?" Hermione breathed, taking an involuntary step forward.

"You know that isn't true," Ron added, though he looked distinctly uncomfortable as he looked at Harry's emotionless face. "You didn't fire that curse at her."

Harry said nothing. But his green eyes flickered with pain.

I might as well have.

It was hard, sitting beside her, to remember Dumbledore's words of wisdom. He was dangerously close to slipping into that darkness he'd been warned of. How easy it would have been. It overwhelmed the light. The light was almost not there at all. A tiny golden flicker in an ocean of black. Harry could keep it in sight for now, but what would happen when she faded?

The light would fade too. And nothing would matter anymore. He could drown in the darkness for all he cared. It would receive no resistance from him. No thrashing to remain surfaced. Just a dead weight. Sinking deeper, deeper, deeper until he forgot what light even was. Until he forgot who *he* was. Until he stopped breathing too.

Ana's chest lifted and fell. No change. No other movement. Still pale as a corpse.

The light dimmed in the sea of black.

Harry barely noticed when his friends retreated and the sun made its slow descent on the distant horizon.

Motionless, he waited.

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The fight towards the surface raged on.

Ana was no longer in the dark, but the place she found herself in now was just as terrible. Perhaps more so. The darkness held nothing. No images, no pain, no feelings. But here...*here* she was trapped in her dreams. Ones that forced her to relive every fear she'd ever had over and over and over again.

At first it was only flickers. Faces flashing past her vision with relentless rapidity, lingering only long enough for her to feel terror at the sight of them. Her parents were prominent in these images, smiling with sinister satisfaction. With victory. Triumph. But worse...far, far worse than those would ever be...were the glimpses she'd caught of Harry's face. Pale. Blood-streaked. *Lifeless*.

Dead. Harry was dead. And she knew somehow that it was her fault. *Why* couldn't she remember? How had this happened? *This couldn't happen*.

But her dreams were only too willing to provide her with the gaps between the pictures. It wasn't long before they became more fluid. Words accompanied them now. Voices. Laughter that held no pleasantness. Laughter that made her spine tingle.

"What a fool you are, Ana..."

"A sorry death, just like his parents..."

"Always were such a disappointment..."

"You cannot win..."

No. No, no, *no*! She wanted to scream the word. She wanted to fight. To claw her way into the scene and prevent it from occurring. But she couldn't move. Couldn't speak. All she could do was watch as the voices and images clashed together to form a moving picture so utterly horrifying it nearly sent her reeling back into the dark again.

They were hurting him. Laughing as they tortured the one she loved, telling him over and over again that she was the reason he suffered. She'd so *very kindly* brought him straight to them. And now he would die. He would die and they would win.

"*Harry...*"

Light burned her vision. Flash after flash of relentless attacks, streaks of life-taking power surging from two outstretched hands.

"*No...*"

She fought. She fought harder than she ever had for anything. She fought for *him*. If she could break through her bonds she knew...she *knew* she could save him. She knew what the darkness felt like. She could keep him from going there too. They could fight together. Together was always how they were meant to be.

"*Harry, no...*"

Pressure that burned. He was fading. She was screaming. It built up and up and up until the sound drowned out the laughter and the voices sick with glee and the dead silence from the raven-haired boy she *loved*, and *loved*, and *loved*.

"*HARRY!*"

She surfaced, breathing hard, surging upward into the light, her body propelling her off something soft—

And straight into someone's arms.

"*Ana*," a voice said, severe with a mixture relief and shock.

Her vision was blurry with tears, but she could make out the dark outlines of the Hospital Wing around her. The arms that were engulfing her felt familiar, and they were what ultimately, *finally*, brought her back. In body, mind, and spirit.

"Harry," she breathed, her voice weak. "*Harry.*"

"Oh god," he choked. She couldn't see his face. He held her so closely she could feel him shaking. "Oh god, you're awake. You're okay. *You're okay.*"

And though the pain of being awake burned her, she smiled, using every ounce of strength she had to bring her arms around him too. She could feel the silent tears on her back where they escaped from him. But he was alive. She was awake and he was alive. Never had she felt such an overwhelming surge of happiness. Never.

"I thought...Merlin, Ana, I thought you were..."

"I'm okay," she whispered, breathing in his scent, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt and barely feeling the pain at all through her crushing relief. Gently, he was pulling back, just enough to be able to see her face, his movements careful as though terrified she'd break at any moment. "I'm okay," she said again, hating the pain so very clear in his eyes.

"You were dead," he said brokenly, lifting both hands to cup her face. He stared at her every feature, and she did the same to him. Both trying to convince themselves that this wasn't somehow a cruel dream. That they were there, together, alive and okay. "You wouldn't wake up. Even after Pomfrey stopped the bleeding...you wouldn't come back. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't do anything, and you were...you..."

His voice cracked and he stopped, unable to go on. Ana lifted her hands to cup his face as well and felt the tears pour from her closed eyes as she rested her forehead against his. Neither could speak. The moment was much larger than them both...and far too heavy with aching hearts. But the hearts were still *beating*. That was the only thing either of them needed to know.

Ana was the first to break the silence, though they had both let it linger for a time that was interminable. Her eyes opened and she pulled away slowly, taking in Harry's features that were illuminated in the soft glow of moonlight streaming through her bedside window.

"Are you alright?" she asked shakily, studying him as though expecting to find him injured somehow. "In the clearing when I...I

can't remember what happened. I thought they...I've had such terrible dreams..."

He looked at her nearly aghast. "Am I alright? You nearly died and you're asking if *I'm* alright?" Suddenly she was pulled against him again and she felt his lips touching her hair. "You're alive, you barmy girl. I've never been more alright in my entire life," he nearly laughed. Ana laughed too, but stopped it short when a shooting pain shot through her.

"Ana?" he said, his voice laced with alarm now. He quickly pulled away and swept his eyes over her features. "Oh, I'm such an *idiot*. I should have gotten Pomfrey the second I heard you talking!" He scoffed in disgust at himself and made to rise off the bed, but Ana grabbed at him with almost a whimper.

"No!" she said, clearly distressed. Harry halted immediately when he felt her hand tug at his. "Please," Ana said quietly. "Please don't leave me. Not yet."

Harry features softened, and he sank slowly beside her once more, squeezing the hand in his. "I'm not going to leave you, Ana," he whispered, reaching out to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Trust me, you'll be lucky if I let you out of my sight ever again."

She closed her eyes with a slight, soft laugh and leaned against his palm. She lifted her free hand and took his wrist, turning to place a kiss against the skin there. The look in Harry's eyes when she finally opened her own was so filled with love it nearly broke her heart.

"I was talking?" she asked in another whisper and only half-interest. Even now, weak and broken, he could still make her heart flutter and cheeks color. Harry's eyes kept their intensity for a moment, and then he nodded.

"You said my name," he replied, his tone holding a lingering tinge of disbelief as though he was reliving the memory over again. "I thought I was imagining things. You've been so *still*. You've barely even moved, let alone talked." The pressure on her hand tightened. She watched as his features contorted briefly in pain.

“Oh, Harry...”

“You kept saying it. It looked like you were dreaming. I tried to wake you, and then you started thrashing. I had no idea what to do. I was about to go run for Pomfrey when you screamed,” he said, the words tumbling out of him. Suddenly the images were coming back Ana. Everything was starting to come back. Like sun erasing fog, clearing her mind until things were sharper and more focused.

“I was fighting,” she said, almost to herself, looking off to the side as her mind showed her the past. “I was always fighting. I *felt* you.” Her eyes shot to Harry now. “I was fighting to get back to you.” Her brow furrowed and she turned away again, this time to the window looking out over the darkened grounds. “Dreams...so many awful dreams. They were hurting you. I was trying to stop them but I couldn’t. Oh, it was *horrible*...”

“Ana, shhh,” Harry reached out for her face again, turning it his way and wiping his thumb over her glistening cheek. “I’m fine. Nothing happened to me. Everything’s fine now.” He leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her pale forehead. “Everything’s fine. They’re never going to hurt anyone again. They’re never going to hurt *you* again,” he said, his voice taking on a hard, determined edge.

“Are they...what happened?” she asked, almost afraid to know.

“The Order came right after you...after you were hurt,” he said, pained again. But when he went on, his voice was a bit steadier. “They took your parents. They’ll get a trial and then be placed in Azkaban. For good,” he finished, the same determination creeping back into his tone.

Ana took this information soberly. There was no remorse felt when she learned what her parents’ fate would be. Only acceptance. She nodded, her eyes turning downward.

“As long as they can’t hurt anyone anymore,” she said quietly. There was a short silence, and then something else occurred to her very suddenly. So suddenly she gasped.

“Ana?” Harry said quickly in concern.

“Malfoy,” she replied, meeting his worried eyes with her widened ones. “He was the one who—”

“Impersonated me,” Harry cut in darkly. His jaw clenched and he had to look away from her, almost as though he didn’t want her to see the murder in his eyes. “I know,” he went on. “They found him near the Great Hall. He’s being interrogated. I can only hope they got Kingsley to do it. Even though that slimy git deserves something far worse than a few punches.”

Ana didn’t like the way Harry’s face hardened, the light leaving his eyes. And so she gripped his hand tighter. It took a moment for him to respond, but when he turned to face her again he was her Harry once more.

“Harry,” she whispered. There was nothing to say. All she could do was keep her gaze locked with his. Harry swallowed hard and pulled her into his chest, careful not to jostle her but holding her with a desperate need.

“I’m so sorry,” he strangled out. “I’m so sorry, Ana.”

“Sorry?” she asked, bewildered. “For what?”

He let out a low grunt. Like a wounded animal. The sound surprised her, and she clung to him tighter.

“For letting this happen to you,” he said when he could control his voice. “I broke my promise. I said they’d never hurt you. In the clearing...I couldn’t stop him, and then you fell and there was so *much blood* and I...I couldn’t...”

“Harry,” she said quickly, alarmed now by his failure to continue speaking. Alarmed with the things he was saying. *Feeling*. Did he really think this was his fault?

“Harry, stop this,” she said, pulling away and forcing him to look at her. Her expression was as distraught as his was defeated. “How can you believe that any of this was your fault? How can you even say that? You *saved* me, Harry. Without you, I’d be dead. You’re what brought me back. *You’re* the one who risked his life for me. How can

you think for one moment that this was your doing?" she said, rushing the words out heatedly, feeling something approaching anger begin to color her cheeks.

"If you're so determined to feel guilty, then you should feel guilty about coming to the stupid clearing in the first place. I mean, honestly, barging in there by yourself? The fact you came at all is bad enough, and then you go and come alone? Against two Death Eaters who are more than capable of killing you, nonetheless. I've never been more frightened in my entire life, Harry, what if they *had* killed you? You're Harry *Potter*, don't you realize how important you are? Never mind how important you are to *me*. I never would have forgiven myself if you died trying to save me, *never*, and another thing—"

Suddenly lips were crushing her own. Her words were cut off with one swift motion from Harry as he kissed her, urgent and searching. Ana soon forgot what she'd been talking about in the first place. If this went on much longer, she would probably forget her own name, too. They molded against one another, together again and so very, very *right*.

"That's completely unfair, you know," she whispered, eyes still closed when he finally pulled away. She opened them and met his twinkling green gaze. "Taking advantage of an invalid. You should be ashamed of yourself."

He laughed, looking decidedly *unashamed*, but it wasn't long before Ana cracked a smile too. "Well I didn't really see any other available options," he replied. "You were being ridiculous. Adorably ridiculous, but still ridiculous."

"*Ridiculous?*" Ana's mouth opened in shock. "I was not—"

"Ana, what would you have done if it had been me in that clearing?" he asked, cutting her off with a look that was suddenly very serious. "If it had been *me* you couldn't find, and had no idea if I was alive or dead or hurt or scared. What then?"

Ana stared at him mutely for a moment, about to open her mouth to argue. But then she stopped, and thought about what he'd just asked. The fight in her faded almost immediately.

“Okay, so you may have a point,” she mumbled, shoulders dropping slightly. “That doesn’t mean my getting hurt was your fault though,” she went on, more determinedly now. That was an argument she would not budge on. “Thinking so would be *ridiculous*.”

Harry chuckled again and pulled her into the crook of his arm, kissing her temple. “Alright, no more fighting about this. I concede. For now.”

Ana grimaced at those last two words but sighed and conceded as well. For now.

“Thank you,” she said.

“What on Merlin’s grand green *earth* is going on here?!”

The shrill voice startled the couple on the bed and both looked up to see a completely and undeniably irate Madam Pomfrey standing in the doorway to the Hospital Wing. Feelings of *déjà vu* struck Ana as she and Harry both did their best trying not to look guilty. The situation was eerily similar to the one they’d found themselves in months and months ago the day Ana had first arrived at Hogwarts. She’d woken then, too. Injured but alive, with a mysterious green-eyed boy at her side.

“Bugger,” Harry said under his breath. “She’s going to kill me.”

“How long has she been awake?” Pomfrey nearly yelled, storming over to Ana’s side. “Potter, so help me, if you don’t remove yourself from that bed in *one instant*—“

“Okay, okay! I’m gone,” he said, rising from the soft mattress and lifting his hands up in defense. He lingered a few steps away, but clearly even that wasn’t good enough for Pomfrey.

“No,” she said, finger pointed straight at him before sweeping it towards the door. “Out.”

“Madam Pomfrey, with all due respect, you can point that thing at me all you want, but I’m not leaving this room,” Harry replied steadily. Even without the edge in his voice it would have been all too clear by his level expression that he wasn’t going anywhere.

Pomfrey's lips whitened and moved into thin line. "Then I suggest you find a corner and stand in it. *Now.*"

Realizing that was probably as good an offer as he was going to get, Harry sighed and stalked off to the bed that was the farthest away and sat down on it with very clear reluctance. Ana tried to angle her head around Pomfrey to see him but the woman was already pushing her back down onto the bed with practiced ease.

"Honestly, the nerve of that boy, so *selfish*, won't leave your side for a moment—"

"Actually, Madam Pomfrey, I was the one who—"

"To think, you've been unconscious ever since he brought you in here, I mean *really*, you easily couldn't have woken up at all with all that blood you lost—does that hurt at all, dear?—and then he refused to be looked at himself even though he hasn't slept at all and barely eaten—drink that up, love, all of it now."

Ana was half dazed at all the prodding she was getting and the whirl of information being thrown at her. Pomfrey was already lifting a bottle with some unidentified liquid in it to her lips as though she wasn't moving quite fast enough for the determined nurse. It tasted wretched, but it relieved some of the ache almost immediately.

"Is all of that really true?" Ana asked, once the bottle was drained, a lingering look of distaste on her face. But she turned to face Pomfrey, brows furrowing and expression falling into one of concern now. "About Harry?"

The nurse had her hand on Ana's wrist, clearly concentrating on checking her heart rate. But she replied nonetheless, her voice still holding a faint trace of bitterness, as though taking Harry's past actions as a personal affront to her duties. "Oh yes," she said, sighing and turning to mix what looked like yet another potion. "It's true all right. Never seen such impudence in all my days here." She shook her head, and then paused mid-pour to turn and meet Ana's gaze for the first time.

"You know, I think that boy may be a little bit in love with you," she said with quiet firmness. And then just like that she was back in nurse mode, shoving another bottle in Ana's hand, missing completely the blush and private smile upon the young girl's face.

"Well, that's all I can do for now. You need to drink this at *least* four times a day. And count your lucky stars. Miracle. Absolute miracle," the woman said, mostly to herself while she shook her head. "Well, I'll need to inform the Headmaster immediately. Meanwhile, maybe you can get *him* to drink that," Pomfrey said, pointing to yet another bottle on the bedside table. "Perhaps you'll have more luck than I have. Merlin knows he'd do just about anything for you. Even if those things are incredibly moronic and detrimental to his health. Not that you're not worth them, dear," Pomfrey added with a motherly pat to Ana's head. The girl barely had time to smile before the nurse turned and headed out of the room without so much as a glance in Harry's direction.

"How do you feel?" he said, appearing at her side quicker than she would have thought possible. Ana looked up at his concerned gaze and grabbed his hand, pulling him down to lay beside her on the small bed with ease.

"Better," she said, sinking into his arms and sighing, resting her head against his chest. "Now."

She felt the vibrations of his soft laugh against her cheek as his arms wound more tightly around her.

"You're in trouble though," she murmured, eyes closing.

"Uh oh."

Ana smiled, listening to the sound of his heartbeat.

"Harry?" she asked softly.

"Yeah?"

"I'm a little bit in love with you too."

“Only a little?” he asked, amusement lining his voice, clearly smiling though she couldn’t see him. It made her smile too.

"I'm willing to be persuaded into increasing it," she replied easily, propping her chin on his chest and looking up at him now.

“Well then,” he said, lifting her chin up until his lips hovered above hers. “I suppose that means I’ll have to see what I can do to persuade you.”

"Yes," she whispered. "I suppose it does."

The soft kiss that followed was enough persuasion to last her a lifetime.

And it was a lifetime she knew with every single beat of her living heart she was all too willing to give.

[illegible]

"Ana, you almost ready? It's time to get going."

“Almost!”

Her hand reached a little farther beneath her bed, finding and grabbing onto her last book with a muffled cry of triumph.

“Got it,” she breathed, popping up from the floor with a sigh. Her hair was a mess, but it went unnoticed as she tucked the book under her arm with a bright smile. With her other hand she bent down to scoop Goldie up from her mewing position at her feet, surveying her dorm room with one final, lingering glance.

The last remaining month of classes had passed by with a speed that was startling, a blur of frenzied students and scattered papers. Ana had made a full recovery in that time, though much of it was admittedly spent in the Hospital Wing under Pomfrey's constant care. Harry had been kind enough to bring her studies to her and it wasn't as though she lacked for *time* to study. It was all she had time for. But

Harry kept her company, never leaving her side for longer than was absolutely necessary.

And Harry wasn't the only one. There'd been a constant stream of visitors ever since Ana's return had been announced. Hermione (who had quickly and profusely apologized for her past behavior) and Ron, Ginny and Dean, Professor Lupin, Dumbledore. Even Sirius had managed to sneak in one night with help from Dumbledore and Remus, much to Ana's chagrin.

"You really shouldn't have, Sirius," she had said, expression torn between distress and gratitude. "If you got caught just because you tried to visit me—"

"Then it would be my own stupid, bloody fault, wouldn't it?" he replied with a flashing grin.

"I already tried to talk him out of it," Harry said from his place next to Ana, sending a disapproving look at his dark-haired godfather. "Wasn't having it though."

"Course I wasn't," Sirius frowned. "You're not the only one who's allowed to be concerned about her, you know," he told Harry before sending a wink at Ana.

"Watch it," Harry replied gruffly, though it went barely heard over the sound of Ana's laughter.

Laughter. There'd certainly been a generous supply of that over the past month too. More than she would have ever thought possible. Despite all that had happened, she was able to smile and feel more content than she'd ever remembered feeling. Or perhaps it was *because* of all that had happened. She was alive. Harry was alive. Her parents had been put away for good. No one would ever feel pain at their hands again.

Through extraordinary struggle and sacrifice, Harry and Ana had emerged still standing. Together.

Together.

“Ana!”

The sound of a sudden voice behind her snapped Ana from her musings. She turned in the now sparse dorm room to find Ginny smiling at her.

“So, Harry is about two seconds away from using his Firebolt to get up here. It’s kiiiiind of funny. I would tell you to wait another five minutes just to see if he’d actually do it, but then I’m pretty sure he’d kill me, so I’m supposed to ask if you’re okay and if you need help with your stuff.”

Ana rolled her eyes with a good-natured grin and turned to grab her last bag. “Honestly, such a baby. I guess I should be lucky he even let me up here this long and didn’t make *you* pack my bags or something.”

“Hah! Maybe for a few of those bajillion Galleons of his,” Ginny replied without missing a beat. Ana laughed and went to follow the ginger-haired girl out of the room, but paused just inside the doorway. It was empty now and silent. The wooden floor was golden where the sunshine streamed upon it from the window. A distant sound of laughter and chatter carried up from the grounds outside as students headed back to the train that would take them home for the summer, only to return once more for another year in the fall. Her heart swelled, as though it was saying goodbye.

But no. Not goodbye. She’d return, just like the others. Another year at Hogwarts. Her home.

“Home,” she sighed.

Goldie mewed again in Ana’s arms and she smiled down at the animal. “I’ll miss it too,” she said to her quietly, gazing around the room one last time. “We’ll be back though. You’ll see.”

And with that, Ana turned, heading down the hall and descending the stairs where Harry was waiting. Impatiently, of course. But he took Ana’s bag from her with a smile nonetheless.

"Ginny thinks I'm overbearing," he said, the smile fading as he sent a not-so-surreptitious sour look at the youngest Weasley.

"You are," Ginny replied in a sing-song voice, not even bothering to turn around as she followed Dean out of the portrait hole. Harry frowned after her, but then turned to Ana with worry in his green eyes.

"Am I really overbearing?" he asked quietly. "I was only joking about the broom thing. Sort of."

Ana said nothing but reached out and grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him in for a swift and highly unexpected kiss.

"How's that for overbearing?" she grinned when she pulled away.

"Smashing. Do it again."

"Harry!" she laughed, turning to gather up her only other bag. "You're the one who kept rushing me in the first place. We have to go. And for the record, you're not overbearing. Sort of." She sent him a mocking smile and headed towards the exit. Harry groaned behind her but was quick to follow.

"I'm not in *that* big of a rush, you know," he said as they stepped into the hall. "It's not like we have a train to catch."

"No, but Sirius has been waiting a long time for us to come back, and he's probably pacing the kitchen at Grimmauld Place as we speak. It's not nice to keep him in suspense."

"Guess you're right. Wouldn't be surprised if he broke out the Christmas decorations again," he grinned. Ana's laughter echoed down the hall, empty save for them. They were headed towards Dumbledore's office. Harry's things had already been sent through the Floo and so he had a free hand, which he used to grab Ana's. She turned, smiling up at him with a light in her eyes meant only for them.

"You sure you're not going to get sick of me all summer?" she asked, teasing mirth in her twinkling gaze.

“I’d say the chances are about 50/50,” he replied casually, keeping his own stare ahead but failing to stop his mouth from twitching upward.

Ana whacked him on the chest with a laugh. “You prat.”

Harry slowed them to a stop with a grin, turning her until she faced him. Behind them the windows showed the broad expanse of the grounds below, rolling gently towards the lake that shimmered with hues of gold and pink as the sun sank slowly beneath the distant hills. But Harry didn’t spare the breathtaking view the slightest of glances. His eyes were fixed on an entirely different view. One that was just as breathtaking.

“I could never get sick of you, Ana,” he told her softly. “Never.”

When she saw the true, shining sincerity in his eyes, Ana knew Harry wasn’t lying. Her heart swelled again. Not saying goodbye this time. But hello. Hello to life and love and all the adventures that came right along with it.

“I think I love you more than just a little now,” she replied, just as softly as her lips curved upward.

“Well that’s good,” Harry said, tugging her closer, “Cause I think I love you more than just a little too.”

He smiled, leaning down to capture her lips with his in a kiss that spoke of a love that went far beyond any sort of measurement.

And in that moment Ana knew she wasn’t leaving behind a home. Home was how she felt when he kissed her. Held her hand. Smiled. Laughed. Home was in his heart, and somehow, *somehow*, she’d been lucky enough to carve her own special place there. Just as he’d carved his own special place on hers. Home was this moment. Every moment. For now and forever.

No, she wasn’t leaving behind a home at all. Or even heading towards one. There was no need, after all.

She was already there.

The End.

[illegible]

AN: I'm trying not to cry. Forgive me if I start to sound a little sappy.

I just want all of you to know how much I've enjoyed sharing this story with you, though it certainly hasn't been without its struggles. I know I've probably lost tons of readers with my severe lack of updates, and again, I can't blame them in the slightest. All I can say is that I'm very sorry, and for those of you who *are* still reading this, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for sticking around. Words will never be enough to fully express my gratitude.

Thanks guys.

Best and kindest regards to you all.

[illegible]